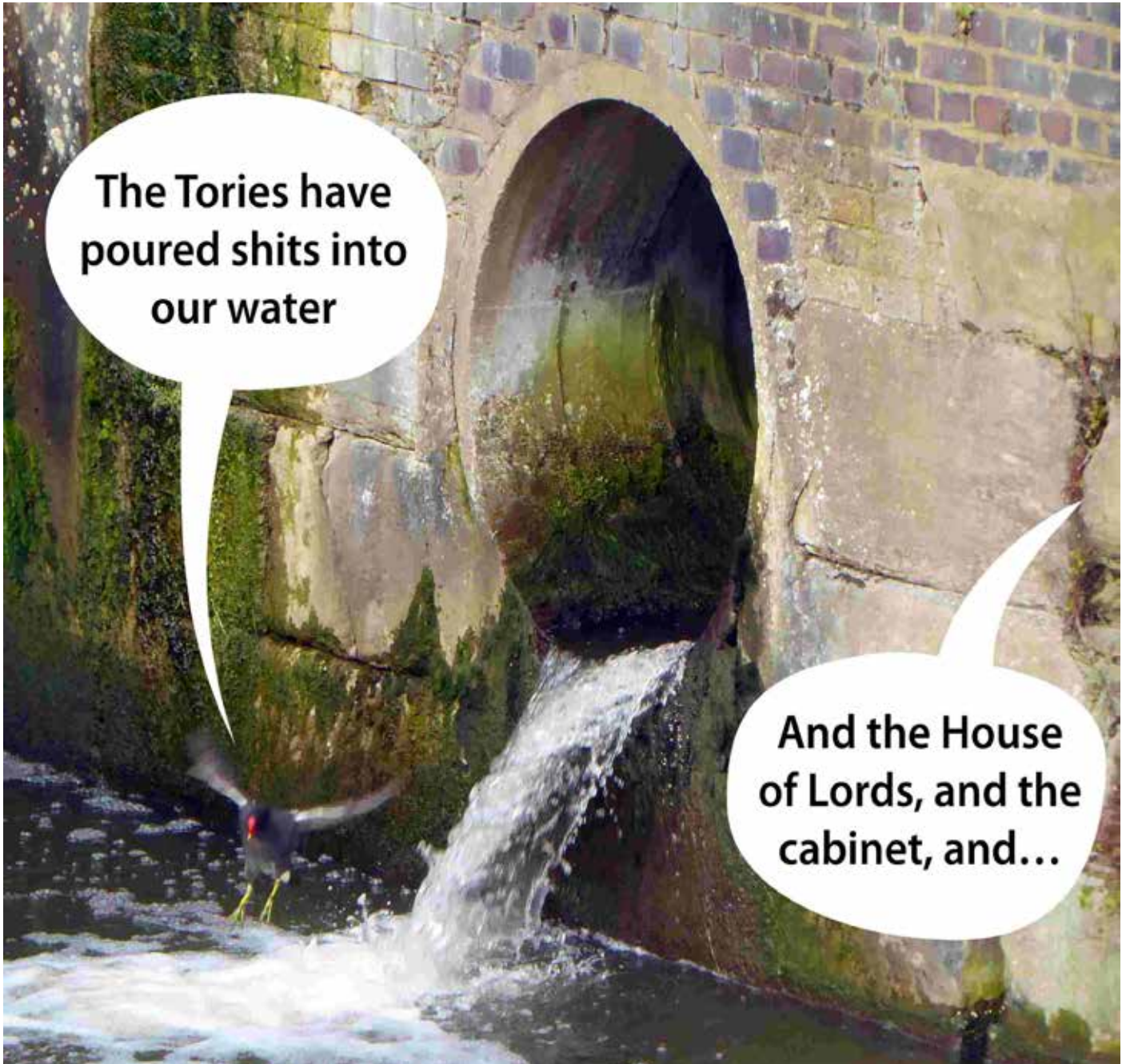


# liberator



- 🗳️ How voter ID undermined May's elections - Shaun Roberts
- 🗳️ Alliance breaks down Northern Ireland's barriers - Stephen Farry MP
- 🗳️ Worse than Trump in the White House? - Martha Elliott

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# COMMENTARY

## LABOUR SHOWS ITS REAL SELF

It was two-all in active by-election campaigns as Liberator went to press, with the Liberal Democrats fighting vigorously in Somerton & Frome and Mid Bedfordshire, but doing very little in Uxbridge & South Ruislip and Selby & Ainsty, which have in effect been left to Labour.

The fifth by-election at Rutherglen is a Labour versus SNP affair with little Lib Dem stake in it.

This means so far the current by-elections follow the pattern of this parliament with the Lib Dems and Labour keeping out of each other's way without declaring any formal arrangement or even - as far as is known - talks on what would happen after a Tory defeat of the kind Tony Blair and Paddy Ashdown held in the mid-1990s.

All this is based on the premise that the Lib Dems would prefer a Labour government to a Tory one and Labour would like the Lib Dems to take Tory seats that will never fall into Labour's hands.

What though would a Labour Government look like? It's often forgotten now that even quite left wing Lib Dems voted in favour of forming the Coalition because the previous Labour government had tried to turn the UK into the worst police state west of Belarus with 42 days detention without charge and compulsory identity cards among other repressive measures.

Kier Starmer had made discouraging noises about electoral reform and nothing coming from Labour indicates any attachment to civil liberties.

This might be dismissed as pre-election positioning were it not all of a piece with the way Labour conducts itself internally.

The cross-party political reform campaign Compass has attracted some interest and support among Lib Dems for its attempts to create a 'progressive alliance' in which Labour, Lib Dem and Green supporters are at least prepared to vote tactically for each other.

Despite Compass's mysterious role in the Lib Dem selection in North Devon (Liberator 417) it has been useful in promoting the concept of tactical voting which, realistically, all non-Tory parties to an extent depend on.

Yet Labour threatens to expel Compass's leader Neal Lawson for the crime of describing as "proper grown up progressive politics" a 2021 tweet by Layla Moran about a local Lib Dem and Green pact in Oxfordshire.

This follows Labour refusing to allow elected mayor Jamie Driscoll to stand again in the north-east for the offence of sharing a platform with the film maker Ken Loach and left-wingers being removed for ideological crimes by an obsessively centralised party machine.

Authoritarianism runs deep in Labour's DNA as the record of the Blair and Brown governments amply

shows - it is the odd small 'l' liberal in Labour's ranks who is the exception.

As any Lib Dem who has tangled with Labour in its heartlands will know, there is little that is benign or pluralist about it.

Removing the Tory government is both urgent and desirable. But if the Lib Dems are going to have informal arrangements with Labour before or after an election they must be clear eyed about Labour's nature.

## POPULISTS STILL THERE

We all have an interest in who ends up as president of the United States of America, given the international influence of the leader of the world's most powerful nation.

The accumulating pile of criminal and civil charges against Donald Trump would in most countries sink any election contender, but in America Trump's ratings have actually improved as his supporters conclude these charges are all part of some conspiracy against him.

Also, in most countries running a presidential candidate aged over 80 would be considered risky given the person concerned - in this case Joe Biden - might become dead or incapacitated before the end of their term. Biden though has decided to stand again and no serious contender has emerged to challenge him for the Democratic nomination.

It is too early to say how the populism that put Trump in the White House in 2016 - and shoved the UK out of the European Union the same year - will finally play out.

Populism was defeated, though not fatly wounded, in America in 2020 but as Martha Elliott's article in this Liberator explains, there are people who are both more plausible and considerably worse than Trump in contention for the Republican nomination. It is not impossible one of them could win the presidency given the numbers who voted for Trump last time and the oddities of the Electoral College system. American populism may be merely sleeping.

Its UK variant has suffered through a combination of Brexit having turned out to so obviously the unmitigated disaster the Remain campaign said it would be, and chief Brexiteer Boris Johnson's misbehaviour and brazen contempt for the public during lockdown.

Whatever Rishi Sunak's sins, he is not an effective populist and is unlikely to stir much of the 'red wall' to vote Tory again.

Populism is ultimately though defeated only by showing it is wrong not by the chance event of it self-destructing through personal misconduct.

# RADICAL BULLETIN

## COURT CIRCULAR

Is Mark Pack really Lib Dem president? Can chief executive Mike Dixon properly sign a legal document? Can Jo Hayes write coherently?

All these propositions and more may be tested in Hayes' continued litigation against the party over her expulsion last year.

Each side is now seeking to persuade the court to strike out the other's case - Hayes because she says the party's defence document is invalid, and the party because it says her claim is incomprehensible.

Hayes has held numerous party positions over decades, most recently as regional candidates chair for the East of England, and it is without known precedent for so prominent a Lib Dem member to be expelled (Liberator 415).

Lack of any clear explanation as to why from the party establishment has allowed conspiracy theories to take hold.

Documents now show that Hayes wants the party's defence against her case struck out by the High Court in the basis that it was signed by chief executive Mike Dixon.

Since Dixon is neither a defendant, nor a legal representative nor a person able to sign a valid statement of truth his signature therefore invalidates the whole defence, she has argued.

Hayes has gone on to argue that Pack, the main defendant in her case (although it encompasses members of the panel that expelled her) is not really the Lib Dem president, although Pack has been commonly described as such since last winter's election.

She argues that Pack's first presidential term ended on 31 December 2022 and that since a rival candidate in his second presidential election has an unresolved claim about the poll's conduct with the Federal Appeals Panel, the election process has not ended.

This means, Hayes argues, that Pack can at best merely be described as acting president until the appeal ends.

The appeal concerned is believed to be from Liz Webster since the third candidate, Lucy Nethsingha, conducted a campaign so low profile it suggested she did not want the job anyway.

Hayes remains aggrieved over the 2019 decision not to accept her as a European Parliament candidate for the East of England. She maintains this resulted from an improperly conducted mock media interview but the party says this was done correctly.

There has been some misconception that Hayes' expulsion was linked to trans rights. The only point where these are mentioned is in a lengthy recital of the case of the controversial removal of a senior adjudicator by the Disciplinary Sub-Group (DSG) (Liberator 413).

This though is just one of a number of examples by which Hayes seeks to show that the DSG - which ultimately runs the process by which she was expelled - is a creature of the party's executive function and not properly independent. Her case does not involve the substance of anything concerning trans rights.

Various documents show the case appears to originate with harassment allegations made against someone whose real name is not given, in which a 'Member X' became involved and intervened to contact the police.

Hayes alleged that Pack and DSG chair Candy Piercy sought to ostracise Member X, who was suspended and later expelled, though in such a ham-fisted way that the Federal Appeals Panel said the case must be sent back for investigation, the outcome of which is not known.

Member X was sentenced to community service after pleading guilty to an unrelated offence in 2021. The party's defence states that Member X was expelled following this conviction and Pack's complaint against Hayes - leading to her expulsion - concerned entanglements related to 'Member X'.

In reply to Hayes' claims, the Lib Dems have said her case should be struck out by the High Court on the basis that its rules require claimants to present a concise summary of the relevant facts.

It says Hayes has instead tabled something "prolix; vague; poorly particularised; frequently refer[ring] to facts with no apparent relevance to the claim or relief sought; do not specify clearly the legal basis for the claim; and do not comply with the requirement for a short summary".

The party argued this meant it did not know what it was supposed to respond to, which has led to additional time and costs spent in trying to figure this out and so called for Hayes' case to be struck out. Hayes argues the party has already delayed the case unreasonably.

Many thousands of words have accumulated on both sides. If this case continues some High Court judge is going to gain a familiarity with the internal workings of the Lib Dems they could probably have lived without.

## BLACKBURN BLACKBALLED

Wikipedia notes that the Star Chamber as established in the 17th century "became synonymous with social and political oppression through the arbitrary use and abuse of the power it wielded".

Unfortunately then that this title is commonly used as the name for the Lib Dem committee that decides who can be a by-election candidate.

Mark Blackburn, who lives locally and fought Somerton & Frome in 2017, found himself on the

wrong end of a star chamber for the current by-election, where the Lib Dem candidate is now the - by all accounts highly capable - local councillor Sarah Dyke.

The chamber sat last year when it first became evident that the antics of former Tory MP David Warburton were likely to mean a by-election before long.

Blackburn was put on a shortlist of five by the local party only to be removed by the star chamber, although he was judged an acceptable general election candidate.

His alleged crimes are thought to have included social media postings hostile to Ed Davey during the leadership election - Blackburn was a vocal supporter of Layla Moran - and being suspectly left wing.

This would appear to set an interesting precedent for other vocal Moran supporters who fancy fighting by-elections.

## CONSULTING ORACLES

There was an unusual plethora of questions to reports at the York spring conference and most could not be answered orally in the time available.

This meant that written answers were eventually provided in an obscure corner of the party website, although they may have been sent personally to questioners.

Amid the usual 'why haven't you taken my motion on coelacanths' there were numerous questions from trans rights and gender critical activists each asking about being kept safe from perceived threats from the other.

Federal Conference Committee chair Nicholas da Costa gave a combined answer in which he said the safety of attendees "is of the utmost importance" and both security staff and volunteer stewards were in place.

He added: "It is important to point out that we should respect each other as members of the same party, regardless of our views on certain items - that is essential to how we want to operate conference.

"It is fine to have robust debates at conference, that's an important aspect of conference. But on the same thread we need to be kind and respectful of each other, and consider the language, tone of what we say."

A question from Federal Council member Mark Johnston about conference costs elicited the information that Spring 2023 was budgeted for a loss of £68,500, since reduced to around £28,000 "due to increased interest in the event and additional cost-savings achieved". Autumn 2023 is forecast to make around £125,000.

Da Costa then said taking into consideration additional costs, such as staffing conference "(spring and autumn) is currently expected to make a loss of around £40,000". It was unclear if this referred to 2023 - in which case the gains and losses appear not to add up - or to autumn 2023 and spring 2024 in which case they might.

Liberator Collective member Gareth Epps asked why Spring conference had no chance to ask questions of the Federal Finance & Resources Committee (FFRC).

The answer to this extremely low profile body's lack of accountability turned out to lie in tortuous thickets of bureaucracy.

Da Costa said questions to the FFRC "are usually asked via the Federal Board, as the FFRC reports to [it]".

The constitution and conference standing orders did not specify a report slot at conference but FFRC had nonetheless submitted a report.

Its report in the autumn "will likely be more substantial as it will include the annual accounts, and thus be an opportunity to ask questions".

Got that? Oh, and if anyone want FFRC to report to both conferences "that would require a constitutional and standing orders amendment".

## STIRRING UP APATHY

The party's problem with almost nobody voting in internal one-member-one-vote elections continues following the 14.05% turnout for party president last year (Liberator 415).

Voting totals for the Lib Dem list for the London Assembly show a mere 2,071 first preference votes were cast, which seems startlingly low given the party is large enough to have won 181 council seats and three constituencies in the capital. Admittedly, 135 councillors and all three MPs are in four boroughs in London's south west.

Perhaps confronted with 11 manifestos all offering to do essentially the same thing few felt motivated to bother voting. Top places went to incumbent Hina Bokhari and to Rob Blackie, both of whom were among the few to campaigned energetically.

Whether the turnout for choosing a mayoral candidate will be any less pathetic remains to be seen.

## TOO SEXY FOR HIS SHIRT

Liverpool Liberal Democrat councillor, Liberator Collective member and Glee Club compere Richard Clein kept up his tradition (OK so it only started when he got elected in 2021) of giving all new councillors a Liberator Songbook.

He was shocked to discover that the new group leader Carl Cashman, (replacing the long serving leader Richard Kemp) had never attended party conference, never mind Glee Club. His partner and new councillor Rebecca Turner, now the youngest councillor in the city at 20, had better get practicing in case conference returns to Liverpool in the future, as the Arena and Conference Centre is in her Waterfront South ward.

This followed his appearance in the Liverpool Echo, which reported he "has caused quite a stir on social media thanks to his impressively muscular physique (he goes to the gym four times a week), tattoos and a trendy approach to fashion (shoes without socks is a look that stood out). A recent video of Cashman talking about his plans for the city was met with responses including 'OK now take your shirt off' and 'he could get me voting Lib Dems'."

## FOOT AND MOUTH

News that eminent solicitor and party stalwart Philip Goldenberg has published an autobiography brought to mind an occasion when among the prizes at a conference raffle was "an hour of Philip Goldenberg's professional time".

Liberator pointed out to the stallholder that nothing displayed indicated the nature of Goldenberg's profession. Back came the reply: "I've been telling everyone he's a chiropodist."

# “PAPERS PLEASE”

## Voter ID has caused a damaging fall in the number of people who can vote and must be reversed before the assault on democracy worsens, says Shaun Roberts

On 4 May, elections took place in England with a requirement for all voters to show a photo ID for the first time.

The Electoral Commission has confirmed that at least 14,000 eligible voters were prevented from casting their ballot because of this new requirement.

That number doesn't include people who were turned away at the door of polling stations by 'greeters' or the people who simply chose not to vote because they didn't have an eligible ID.

Independent poll watchers, who observed voting at hundreds of polling stations, found that more than half those turned away were non-white voters. Some were turned away even if they had the correct ID.

The Electoral Commission's data suggests that disabled and unemployed voters were most likely to list the new photo ID requirements as a reason for not voting.

### UNMITIGATED FLOP

The Government's flagship free ID scheme for those people without ID was an expensive, unmitigated flop. More than 4 in 10 voters weren't even aware it existed. Fewer than 1 in 20 of the estimated 2.1m people who do not have a valid ID applied for a free ID.

We could go on - but it should be clear to everyone that Voter ID isn't working and it is taking away the right of citizens to vote.

It needs to be scrapped before we get to a general election and where the problems seen on 4 May will be multiplied many, many times over.

But before we get to what should be the end of the voter ID story, let's explore how we got here in the first place.

The UK's election laws are in dire need of updating - in 2020 the Law Commission reported to the Cabinet Office: "Electoral law in the UK is spread across 17 statutes and some 30 sets of regulations. It has become increasingly complex and fragmented; it is difficult to access, apply, and update. Much of the law is rooted in 19th Century language and practice, and doesn't reflect modern electoral administration."

It called for a complete rationalisation and modernisation of our laws into a single, consistent legislative framework.

In 2021, the Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL) published a report on Regulating Electoral Finance which backed up the Law Commission's report and highlighted serious vulnerabilities in our election laws.

So when the Government brought forward its Elections Bill in 2021 (a Bill they had initially dubbed the Electoral Integrity Bill) there were hopes that it might address the very real problems in our system. Those hopes didn't last long.

The Elections Bill ignored almost every issue raised by the Law Commission and the CSPL. Instead we got a bill that: ended the independence of the UK's Electoral Commission; allowed UK citizens who have been overseas for more than 15 years to vote in elections and donate to political parties; changed the voting system for mayoral and police & crime commissioner elections to first-past-the-post; introduced one of the most restrictive Voter ID laws in the world.

The Elections Bill doesn't address the problems in our electoral system. Instead it changes the rules around elections for the benefit of one party.

And thanks to the Government's huge majority and the inherent weakness of the House of Lords, it worked.

The Government has the power to set the priorities of the Electoral Commission. Our politics is now open to a fresh wave of foreign donations. The Conservative Party gained an elected mayor in Bedford on 4 May thanks to the change to the voting system. And thousands of people lost their vote because of voter ID laws.

The Government continues to say that political considerations had nothing to do with these changes. However one former Cabinet Minister has come clean about their motives on Voter ID at least.

Speaking recently, Jacob Rees Mogg said: "Parties that try and gerrymander end up finding their clever scheme comes back to bite them, as dare I say we found by insisting on Voter ID for elections."

The cat is well and truly out of the bag. Voter ID was always an expensive solution to a problem that doesn't exist. Out of over 58m votes cast in 2019, there were two proven cases of the kind of voter fraud that Voter ID is designed to prevent.

To prevent that fraud, the Government brought forward a scheme that costs up to £180m over 10 years and has taken away the votes of tens of thousands of people in its first major test.

We have missed a critical opportunity to bring our election laws into the 21st century and tackle the serious vulnerabilities highlighted by CSPL and the Law Commission. Instead we've ended up adding yet new weaknesses and biases into the system.

So now we're back to the present day and surely the Government will now listen to the evidence from 4 May?

Sadly the only reaction has been from a junior minister in the House of Lords who said, "My Lords, we are encouraged by the first rollout of voter identification and are confident that the vast majority of voters will have cast their vote successfully based on sector feedback and our own observations on the day."

This suggests that the Government plans to carry

on this disastrous policy through to the general election, where it's highly likely that hundreds of thousands of people will be denied their vote.

We can't let this happen - Unlock Democracy and a coalition of organisations will fight to stop this. We hope the Liberal Democrats and politicians in all political parties will join this campaign.

The introduction of voter ID is a dangerous step down the slippery slope to the kind of politics we see in the USA. A place where political parties don't just fight to persuade people how to vote, but there's a whole extra battle trying to prevent certain voters from voting at all.

When I first visited a Democratic party HQ in 2008, I noticed an office that had the words 'Voter Protection' on the door. I asked people what it was for and they told me it was the lawyers who worked to ensure that those that were eligible to vote, could actually vote.

How desperately sad is this? How in a democracy can we have parties that actively work to prevent their own citizens from even casting their ballot?

We're a long way from the mess that is America, but we are edging in that direction and that needs to be stopped right now.

Because in a democracy, all parties and players should be able to agree on some basic rules. Rules like if you're an eligible voter, then you should be on the electoral register and be able to vote without unnecessary barriers being placed in front of you.

As President Biden put it at the recent Summit for Democracy: "The right to vote, to have your vote counted, is the threshold of democracy and liberty everywhere in the world. And with it, anything is possible. Without it, in my view, nothing is possible."

At the same summit, the UK Government signed up to an ambitious declaration reaffirming our commitment to advance democracy around the world.

Clearly many members of that Government haven't read that. How else can you explain their actions on human rights and democracy issues?

In a good democracy, governments try to encourage more citizens to take part by making voting as accessible as possible. More people taking part in elections strengthens democracy.

But we've seen precious little progress in this direction in recent times. No movement towards granting votes to 16 or 17 year olds (apart from in Scottish and Welsh elections, thanks to the Scottish and Welsh governments, not Westminster). No testing of new ways to vote using our phones or by allowing us to vote in different places or on different days. No movement to address the estimated 9.0m eligible voters who aren't even on the electoral register.

Instead we've seen many EU voters who live in the UK and pay their council tax lose their right to vote in local elections. We've seen voter ID laws that force 2.0m of our citizens to get a photo ID or be excluded from our democratic process.

*"The introduction of voter ID is a dangerous step down the slippery slope to the kind of politics we see in the USA"*

## **BRUTALLY EXPOSED**

While Voter ID laws were making their way through Westminster, we saw the inconsistency of the Government's line brutally exposed.

In July 2021, it was suggested that, in order to tackle bullying and abuse on social media, users should

have to provide a photo ID. The Government cried foul and said it would be a restriction on freedom. They even cited the fact that 2.0m people do not have a photo ID. Later the same year when it was suggested that vaccine passports might be required to visit pubs, many Government MPs attacked such a move.

One MP said at the time, "We are not a papers please society. This is not Nazi Germany. It's the thin end of an authoritarian wedge and that's why we will resist it."

A reasonable person might be forced to conclude that the Government puts access to social media accounts and pubs over the right to vote in elections. We would argue that it's simply breathtaking hypocrisy.

So here we are barrelling towards a general election that might end up excluding the votes of hundreds of thousands of our citizens from deciding the outcome of that election.

The research suggests that these voters will be the poorest in our society, young voters, very old voters, voters from ethnic minorities and disabled voters.

Their voices deserve to be heard and that's what Unlock Democracy and our coalition is going to be campaigning for between now and the election.

Because we won't accept that our democracy should work like this. We believe in something better.

At a time when trust in our politics has never been lower, we believe that there's an opportunity for change that we've not seen in decades.

Because people can see that the political system simply isn't working for them. They can see that the system is broken from Boris Johnson's resignation honours list through to VIP lanes for Covid contracts for friends of government ministers. They can see how those in power think they can live by a different set of rules to ordinary people and get away with it.

They can see that much of the media isn't reporting the news any more and are instead acting as mouthpieces for whichever billionaire owns them. They can see that politicians face little consequence for telling lies or horrendous incompetence.

The stage is set for political leaders who will stop ignoring these problems and act decisively to deliver the systemic change our politics needs.

The question is who will step up to the task? Voter ID needs to be scrapped, but that's the tip of the iceberg if we are to renew and rebuild a functioning democracy in the UK. That's what we're committed to fighting for. You can find out more about our work at [www.unlockdemocracy.org.uk](http://www.unlockdemocracy.org.uk)

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Shaun Roberts is director of campaigns and digital at Unlock Democracy

# THE DIVIDE STARTS TO BREAK

## Stephen Farry MP reports on the Alliance party's progress in Northern Ireland as its politics slowly sheds past sectarianism

The Alliance Party has experienced rapid growth over the past few years, and has now gone through a full electoral cycle across European (alas gone for at least awhile), Westminster, assembly and local government elections as the third largest party in Northern Ireland in terms of vote share.

Alliance made a major breakthrough after our foundation in 1970. However, by the 1980s, we had essentially become the fifth party in a four-party system, with extreme and more moderate unionist and nationalist parties – respectively the Democratic Unionist Party, the Ulster Unionist Party, Sinn Fein and the Social Democratic and Labour Party.

Alliance provided a cross-community, anti-sectarian, and increasingly a liberal, progressive alternative to parties defined by competing views on the constitutional question and essentially ethno-nationalist in nature.

For much of this time, it was a struggle for Alliance to make a significant impact. However, our continued existence was in itself a relative success given the relative absence of cross-community parties in other deeply divided societies around the world.

Ironically, Alliance had its greatest struggle in the years immediately aftermath of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. While at first this may seem counter-intuitive as Alliance had been advocating peace, power-sharing and reconciliation through its history, it reflects a situation where there was a perception of mission accomplished within the electorate and a preference for investing in the moderate unionist and nationalist parties that were presumed to henceforth manage Northern Ireland.

In the subsequent years, Alliance refreshed its message to a much greater extent on building a shared and integrated society, and progressive social and economic change. At the same time, the balance of power changed within unionism and nationalism in favour of the DUP and Sinn Fein.

### SIGNIFICANT BREAKTHROUGH

By 2010, Alliance made significant breakthroughs through achieving the election of its first MP, Naomi Long in East Belfast, and providing Northern Ireland's first justice minister in David Ford. By 2011, I had joined David in the power-sharing executive as the minister for employment and learning.

The Alliance surge really took off in 2019, starting with a major leap forward in the local government election with a 40% increase in seats and breaking the 10% ceiling in vote share. However, the party was still in fifth place in votes and seats. Several weeks later, Alliance moved to third place and for the first time won

one of Northern Ireland's three seats in the European Parliament. Regrettably, this forum of representation for the UK only persisted for a few more months.

In the 2019 general election, I won the North Down seat, and Alliance overall consolidated its place as the third party in terms of votes. Westminster elections had traditionally been particularly challenging for Alliance given the first-past-the-post electoral system and the tendency for voters to vote tactically.

With the 2022 assembly election, Alliance doubled its number of MLAs from eight to 17 and moved to third place in both seats and votes for the first time in what is the main forum for electoral representation in Northern Ireland. And most recently, in the 2023 local government election Alliance gained further seats and moved to third place overall.

This growth in Alliance representation owes much to organisation and levels of campaigning activity on the ground. It also reflects a sharpening of message.

Beyond messaging and organisation, Alliance has benefitted from demographic changes and in particular a growing number of people who have moved away from traditional notions of unionist or nationalist identity and defining themselves in different ways.

And finally, the external political environment of more entrenched polarisation between the largest two parties, the stop-start nature and regular collapses of the assembly and the implications of Brexit have facilitated stronger and contrastive messaging.

Brexit has posed major existential questions for Northern Ireland. Our region can only work on the basis of sharing and interdependence as facilitated via the Good Friday Agreement. This was reinforced by the joint UK and Irish membership of the European Union, and specifically the single market and customs union, which allowed open borders across these islands.

The Brexit project was conceived with little consideration of the implications for Northern Ireland. It sought to impose a black and white outcome on a complex situation, with inter-locking relationships, that requires shades of grey.

A hard Brexit necessitates a line on the map somewhere to manage the interface between the UK and EU single market. Any such line brings some degree of friction and a threat to some people's sense of identity.

The particular challenges posed to Northern Ireland necessitated some form of special arrangements, whether that be the original proposed backstop, the protocol or the protocol's upgrade to become the Windsor Framework.

In a monumental strategic mistake, the DUP backed Brexit and continued to argue for a hard Brexit and



in doing so destabilised Northern Ireland. Having rejected a pragmatic response, they have now framed the protocol as a constitutional threat and withdrew from the power-sharing executive to try to force either significance change or the scrapping of the protocol in its entirety.

While there is no good or sensible version of Brexit, the Windsor Framework does provide the best attempt to square the impossible circle. Notably, it offers Northern Ireland unfettered dual market access to both Great Britain and the European Union.

This is reinforced by significant international goodwill to Northern Ireland especially this year with the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement.

## **POLITICAL CRISIS**

Yet Northern Ireland is going through its greatest political crisis in the decades since the end of most of the terrorist violence, with the assembly and executive blocked from sitting by the DUP veto and an associated budgetary crisis.

Northern Ireland voted clearly for Remain. That majority pro-European position has persisted over the past seven years. It has been matched by consistent support for special arrangements to manage Brexit. The Windsor Framework has a greater level of support than the original protocol, with elements of unionism becoming more pragmatic in accepting it.

Yet there remains a persistent section of the electorate of between 25 and 30% that continues to reject the Windsor Framework fuelled by DUP rejection. With a rejectionist message, the DUP largely held their electoral position in the local government election.

At present, they are seeking further assurances and guarantees from the UK Government as to the UK internal market. However, the space in which this can be achieved is very narrow as there is no space to renegotiate the Windsor Framework with the EU and only matters that are within the domestic scope of the UK could be considered. Furthermore, any measure that would undermine the Good Friday Agreement would be resisted by the Irish Government and other parties.

If the DUP genuinely want to preserve the union, they need to move away from wrongly framing the protocol as a constitutional issue and instead see it as a practical challenge to be managed.

*“The Brexit project was conceived with little consideration of the implications for Northern Ireland. It sought to impose a black and white outcome on a complex situation, with interlocking relationships, that requires shades of grey”*

## **DUP DANGER TO THE UNION**

Their continued blocking of the assembly and executive from functioning risks giving the impression that Northern Ireland can't work and accelerating demands for a united Ireland. In trying in their terms to 'save the union', they are in danger of killing it.

Without a swift return of the political institutions, Northern Ireland's crisis will become even more acute and more and more questions will be raised around different governance options and the constitutional future of Northern Ireland and the island of Ireland as a whole.

Yet, the flipside of the rejectionist vote is the

70%-plus who do want to see the assembly restored immediately and who take a pragmatic view of the Windsor Framework. This 70% does include a significant number of unionists.

There is another way through the deadlock which lies in institutional reform. While Alliance has always been a pro-agreement party, we have had reservations and concerns around how the nature of the institutions entrenched communal differences and provided vetoes to parties over government formation and survival.

Over the past 25 years, the institutions have been suspended for 40% of the time. This is not sustainable.

The system of unionist and nationalist designations and the associated so-called cross-community voting system for key decisions needs to be replaced with a form of weighted-majority voting and moves towards a voluntary coalition approach to power-sharing. In the short-term, the current veto that the DUP has on executive formation could be removed and the next largest party in size should be allowed to take up the role of deputy first minister.

So far the UK and Irish Governments have only paid lip-service to reform. Yet, if we enter the autumn and the impasse continues and the options become the return of a form of direct rule with a consultative role for the Irish Government, the case for this approach which keeps decision-making in the hands of local voices must become even more creditable.

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Stephen Farry MP is the deputy leader of the Alliance Party

# HOW TO SUP WITH STARMER'S DEVILS

It may be necessary to have a tacit 'progressive alliance' at the next election but Liberal Democrats should remember that Labour is only slightly better than the Tories, says Peter Wrigley

I am an enthusiast for a 'progressive alliance' and welcome the small steps Liberal Democrats, Labour and Greens are taking at the moment on unofficial and tentative agreements not to fight too hard in those constituencies where one of the others looks to have the better chance of ousting the Tory to elect a parliament that more properly reflects the more liberal (small "l") tolerant and humane views of the majority of British voters.

Consequently, I am not in the game of entering a turf-war of insults with the Labour Party, or the Greens.

However, sadly there is no shortage of Labour stalwarts anxious to squash talk of co-operation by hurling insults about the wicked things Liberal Democrats supported when in the 2010-15 Coalition, and are unconvinced by, or indifferent to, the argument that without our ameliorating influence the Tories would have been even worse (which they have been since 2015)

However, to furnish responses to bat away any such accusation when the need arises, here are a dozen reasons why I am a Liberal rather than Labour supporter.

## MILIBAND'S MUG

Labour is not a Liberal party. Liberalism at its best means the maximum amount of individual freedom compatible with the freedom of others. That is our principle objective. Labour is too willing to sacrifice our freedoms when it seems electorally convenient (eg support for ID cards, the anti-migrant mug under Miliband.)

Labour is a 'top down' authoritarian, centralising party, convinced of the rightness of its own policies and prepared to impose them from above. This is true in local as well as central government. By contrast Liberals try to build from below, trusting people and helping us to find our own solutions.

Following from that, Labour appears to prefer conflict to compromise. For example, in response to their trade union financiers, they have always resisted Liberal policies of employee representation on company boards and, where appropriate, profit sharing.

Nowhere is the authoritarian streak more evident than in education. When I trained as a teacher we were taught to be proud of the fact that (in contrast to the French) it was teachers and governors who decided what was taught. It was Labour prime minister Jim Callaghan who introduced the 'national debate on education' which led to the National Curriculum and eventually dictatorial restrictions, not only on what

should be taught, but how, and the bullying ethos of Ofsted.

Labour stalwarts attribute the present threadbare state of our public services to the "savage cuts" in public spending introduced by George Osborne in the 2010-15 Coalition. Quite right too. Despite the anguished protests of my blog ([keynesianliberal.blogspot.uk](http://keynesianliberal.blogspot.uk)) and like-minded Liberals faithful to the insights of Keynes and Beveridge, the Liberal Democrat leadership, to their shame, went along with them. But, the Labour leadership also went along with this misguided group-think. Here are extracts from the seven bullet points on Page 0.6 of their Manifesto for the 2010 elections, all promising "Tough choices on. . . .£15bn efficiency savings. . . £11bn for further operational efficiencies . . . cutting government overheads. . . public sector pay . . . £5bn already identified in cuts . . .£1.5bn of savings on welfare reform. . . £20bn on asset sales."

We should listen sympathetically to any suggestion that these would not have been as severe as Osborne's cuts. Well, maybe - who knows? But they would still have been wrong. A strong dose of 'pot and kettle' needs to enter this debate.

The public and media seem to accept that today's students leave university burdened with debt and attribute this to the Coalition. But that is not the whole story. First it was the Labour Government under Tony Blair who introduced tuition fees for higher education, having first promised they wouldn't. These started at £1,000 a year, payable up-front, in 1998, and were increased by the Labour government to £3,000 per year - again having said they wouldn't - in 2006.

True, the Coalition raised the figure to £9,000 but, and it's a big 'but', abolished the up-front payment in 2012 and substituted a loan scheme, repayable only when the ex-tudent's salary reached a respectable level, and cancelled if it had not been fully repaid after 30 years.

Effectively it makes graduates liable to an additional tax hypothecated to the financing of higher education if they earn good money, normally as a result of the qualifications they have received at public expense. The unacceptable part of the scheme is that the rate of interest on the 'loan' has been absurdly high when the actual rate of interest in the economy has, for most of the past decade, been negligible.

Labour sees itself as the only source of good ideas, they had the opportunity to enact significant constitutional reform, but failed to do so:

The Liberal Democrats forced the Tories to agree to

a referendum in 2011. The option of the Alternative Vote was offered. It was not the Liberal Democrats' preferred method but was chosen because it was the one proposed in the

Labour Party manifesto. Labour leader, Ed Miliband, supported it but the party diehards (Blunkett, Straw and others) opposed it and the party as a whole failed to campaign for it. The referendum was lost

The Tories agreed in the Coalition to allow the Liberals to put forward a Bill for House of Lords reform. The Labour party appeared to agree with it - but refused to vote for the parliamentary time to debate it. Had it been debated and passed we should have been spared the nonsense of Johnson and Truss attempting to nominate their acolytes as lifetime legislators.

The Labour Party vehemently opposed our joining the EU at its creation, and were at best lukewarm about our membership. In the Brexit referendum they failed to campaign with any enthusiasm for Remain and so share responsibility for our present woes.

## **SAVING THE WORLD**

Although Gordon Brown is to be applauded for 'saving the world' (or at least the banks) by successfully organising international co-operation to support the world financial systems after the crash of 2008-09, his policy of financing public works through the private finance initiative to disguise increases in public debt have left many hospitals and other public facilities with over-expensive and unnecessary financial burdens.

Labour's policies towards social security for the less affluent were not as cruel as the Tories', but hardly generous. They fell into the trap of the strivers/skivers debate, and wanted to be seen as 'tough' on the latter.

With the noble exception of Huddersfield-born Harold Wilson, who kept us out of the Vietnam War, Labour leaders have been eager to coat-tail the military ventures of the US, most disastrously in Iraq and Afghanistan.

*"The Labour Party is now an anachronism"*

The Labour Party is now an anachronism. Maybe in the late 19th and early 20th century, when a huge proportion of the population worked in factories and, if they could vote, saw their

choices as limited to their bosses or the landowners, it was necessary to create a party to represent 'the workers.'

Since it was created, and still primarily financed, by the trade unions to represent their interests in parliament, that is its function. But those days are over. Fewer people work in factories (though many still do in inhumane conditions such as Amazon warehouse), the majority of the workforce are white collar and, as the present misnamed industrial unrest illustrates – dissatisfaction has spread to highly skilled professions such as doctors, nurses, teachers, lecturers and civil servants.

There may be still a need for a party to specialise in the defence of the living standards and conditions of employed people in whatever roles, along with those of the weaker members of society. But politics is wider than that. Such a party should not attempt to monopolise power to itself or it becomes part of the reactionary forces it was created to oppose.

The progressive parties with different priorities must work together. We need to concentrate on what we have in common - a fairer society, concern for the less advantaged both at home and abroad, the maintenance of peace domestically and internationally, and the opportunity of the poorest he (and she) as well as the richest to live a full and fulfilling life.

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Peter Wrigley is president of Batley and Spen Liberal Democrats

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# HOW LABOUR KEPT CHERWELL BLUE

## Labour scuppered a progressive majority alliance at Cherwell District Council, the last bit of blue in Oxfordshire, says David Hingley

At local council level, Oxfordshire has become a true Liberal Democrat heartland, a real success story of bringing the Blue Wall crashing down. Not long ago, the Tories were dominant here: now, the county council is run by a Liberal Democrat-led alliance, as are the district councils of West Oxfordshire and South Oxfordshire, while the Lib Dem Vale of White Horse no longer suffers a single Tory in the chamber. Tireless teams of activists have made this possible, working over many years to bring about this much needed change.

And yet there remains one pocket of blue – but it didn't still have to be that way.

### REAL EXCITEMENT

After the elections this May, there was real excitement that the last remaining vestige of Tory control in Oxfordshire would finally be swept away. Cherwell District Council, in other words north Oxfordshire, went into no overall control after decades of Tory rule. Yet we have ended up with a Conservative minority. How did this happen?

Sandwiched between Stratford upon Avon and the rest of Oxfordshire, it should not be a surprise that the Lib Dems are going from strength to strength in Cherwell. From three councillors in one ward in 2021, to 10 councillors in five wards now, we are sweeping

aside long-serving Tory councillors as voters look for a credible alternative they can depend on.

Cherwell operates under a group rather than party system, and to maximise our influence, we sit with the three Green councillors and one Independent to make a group of 14, presently called Progressive Oxfordshire; the Conservatives have 20, Labour 12, and the other Independents have two.

With our previous group leader standing down at the elections, I took up the reins, and as expected we entered negotiations with the Labour group with the hope of forming a majority alliance.

The talks went well: so well that soon we had an agreement ready to go, a list of priorities both sides had signed up to, and even a press release drawn up. Everything was set for a big announcement – a new start for Cherwell, the first non-Conservative administration in decades.

And then I got the text. The night before we were hoping to announce the alliance, the Labour leader messaged that he needed to speak – urgently. With a sense of foreboding I replied, although I had to wait until the following day to be told the news.

Everything was off. There was to be no alliance. Labour's national executive committee (NEC) had pulled the plug, refusing to allow their councillors to sit with the Greens or Independents, who form an integral part of our group and without whom there would be no stable majority.

Bear in mind this wasn't a barrier for Labour in West Oxfordshire, or at the county council – so why was it a problem here?

After Labour walked away, the situation quickly deteriorated. Statements were issued by them that accused our side of refusing to cooperate, when the opposite had been the truth. Media interest exploded – radio, TV, local and national papers, all came knocking with requests for interviews and quotes. Despite Labour's attempts to deflect blame onto us, neither the press nor residents were much fooled as to who was responsible.

The annual council meeting on 17 May arrived, with no one now able to form a majority. A vote of no confidence was called in the outgoing Conservative leader, which in our no overall control



situation he lost. Despite only having 12 councillors (out of 48), Labour tried to thrust their own leader forward, but this untenable proposal was roundly rejected. Knowing we owed it to the voters to hold out for one last attempt at forging a majority alliance, I sought an adjournment to allow us to try for just that, but Labour and the Conservatives voted against.

## **FARCICAL SCENES**

In scenes resembling a farce, the Conservative leader (having just lost the vote of no confidence) announced he would nonetheless put himself forward to run the council again, but was naturally voted down. In a recess, Labour refused to return to talks, and the Tory leader put himself forward again. . . only to be defeated, again. Next it appeared the Tories were going for a filibuster, speaking at length in an attempt to draw proceedings out, but we weren't going to let them in by default without exhausting the possibilities. This time, when in an effort to break the deadlock I called for an adjournment, Labour voted with us, perhaps realising their strategy hadn't worked.

The meeting adjourned for six days. More press. More radio. More interviews. During this time I contacted Labour, and got a message saying they were available to talk. . . were they going to listen to reason? With a desire to give it every chance, we re-engaged in discussions, and for a moment it looked like we might be back on track. But their NEC remained implacable: there would be no deal.

*“Labour’s national executive committee had pulled the plug, refusing to allow their councillors to sit with the Greens or Independents, who form an integral part of our group and without whom there would be no stable majority”*

By then, it had become apparent that the NEC were blocking deals on councils in similar situations up and down the country. The Guardian contacted me for a piece they were writing on the issue; other Lib Dems emailed to sympathise, explaining how they too were being impeded by an intransigent Labour Party that was ordering its local politicians to walk away from cross-party deals. Cherwell, it seemed, was not alone in its fate. Here, a Tory minority was the end result, with myself becoming leader of the opposition.

So what are the lessons from this unfortunate tale? Prioritise getting Lib Dems elected, practice your media

appearances, and grow a very thick skin. Work out who you have around you for support, and most of all – never give up.

In next year's elections, we hope to continue our upwards progress, winning many more council seats to become the largest party on Cherwell ourselves. Soon, that last chink of blue on Oxfordshire's local political map will finally be removed.

---

David Hingley is the Liberal Democrat leader of the Opposition on Cherwell District Council

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# WILL THE LAW FINALLY STICK TO THE TEFLON DON?

## Donald Trump is in legal trouble, but there could be Republican candidates who are even worse, says Martha Elliott

History often repeats itself. A little more than hundred years ago, socialist leader Eugene V Debs kicked off his presidential campaign while sitting in a cell in the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary.

He had been convicted under the Espionage Act of 1917 for giving a speech in 1918 that was intended to interfere with the WWI military draft. Despite his lack of campaign stumping, Debs received nearly a million votes (3.4%). He gave no concession speech on election night because, as he put it, he was a “candidate in seclusion”.

Thirty-one out of the 37 indictments against former president Donald Trump are under section 793(e) of the same 1917 Espionage Act. That section is not about free speech. It makes it a crime to keep secret national documents and refuse to return them. Dozens of documents marked top secret were found in a raid of Trump’s Mar-a-Lago home by FBI agents on 8 August 2022.

Although Debs was sentenced to 10 years in prison, he was pardoned by President Warren . Harding probably because many felt the part of the law under which he was convicted was an unconstitutional violation of freedom of speech.

Trump hasn’t been convicted of anything, but he has vowed to stay in the race even if he goes to prison. And if he loses the election, I doubt that he would make a concession speech on election night - or any other night. He also has made it clear that he would pardon himself, if elected.

Although none of the other Republicans seeking the nomination have vowed to pardon him, they have indicated that the judicial system is skewed against conservatives or that his imprisonment would not be in the country’s best interest.

### POLITICAL PROSECUTION

In my judgment, Debs’ conviction was a blatant violation of the first amendment of the US constitution and most likely a political prosecution because he was the leader of the American Socialist Party.

Trump’s charges are far more serious. He left the White House with dozens of boxes of documents. When the National Archives asked about documents that were missing, Trump denied having them and then turned over some. Then when his lawyers were asked to search for more documents, Trump got his valet to hide them. After many months of negotiations, some documents were turned over and his lawyers swore that all of his presidential documents had been returned.

But through whistleblowers and records of the national archives, the government knew there were

more. Finally, (while the documents could have been shown to anyone or copied), the FBI got a warrant and raided his home.

The secret documents case is not Trump’s only legal problem. He was successfully sued for sexually abusing and libelling writer E Jean Carroll and ordered to pay \$5m in damages. (Trump tried to get the amount reduced because the jury rejected her rape claim, but a judge rejected his argument.)

In addition, the special prosecutor overseeing the documents case is looking into his role in the 6 January attack on the Capitol. This part of the probe is significant because if it is determined that Trump participated in an insurrection, not only would he face prison but also be barred from holding any federal or state office. Another important case is whether he directly interfered in the 2020 Georgia election. He called the governor and other officials asking them to “find” enough votes to give him the state’s electoral votes. This is a state case and even if Trump or another Republican were elected, he or she could not pardon him for a state conviction. That’s also the situation in New York where he is being prosecuted for using campaign funds to pay a woman to keep quiet about an affair.

A reasonable person might assume that all of Trump’s legal problems would hurt his chances of obtaining the Republican nomination. However, his ratings have gone up slightly. About half of Americans, including me, believe Trump should go to prison, but his supporters think he’s being persecuted. Asa Hutchinson, a former federal prosecutor and a candidate for the Republican nomination, recently declared that federal cases “don’t get any more serious” than the one against Trump. Whether Republicans agree with Hutchinson’s accusation or not, his indictment and whether, if convicted, he should be pardoned are destined to be a prominent a campaign issues no matter who wins the Republican party’s nomination.

Nikki Haley, former UN ambassador under Trump and now a candidate for president, said that if the charges are true, Trump has been incredibly reckless with American national security. Yet the next day she said if convicted, he should be pardoned because it’s not about guilt but about what’s good for the country. She said that the spectre of having a former president in prison would be terrible. A few Republican leaders have echoed Trump and called the indictment the weaponisation of the justice department. Some cite unequal justice because Biden was not indicted even though a box of documents was found in his garage - but Biden invited the warrantless search of his house rather than resisting it for more than a year.

For the most part, Republican candidates and

leaders have avoided direct comments about Trump hiding the sensitive documents which included nuclear secrets, secrets of our allies, and plans in the event of a war with Iran.

Among those seeking the Republican nomination only Hutchinson and Chris Christie, both former prosecutors and former governors, have called for Trump to drop out of the

race. Christie has gone so far as to say that Trump is unfit to serve as commander in chief.

For now, Trump seems to focus his campaign on vilifying the American justice system. His bombastic bullying is how he has avoided legal problems throughout his career as a developer and television celebrity.

He doesn't pay his bills. He uses bankruptcy laws to avoid losing his wealth. He denies everything. He accuses others of "false news." Nothing sticks - even two impeachments while he was president. He's the only president impeached twice - although not thrown out of office - and only two other presidents out of 46 have been impeached. So he may once again avoid paying any penalty, a pattern throughout his business and political career. He may be as slippery as the Mafia boss, known as the Teflon Don, John Gotti.

Biden hasn't publicly said a word about any of Trump's civil or criminal proceedings. Democratic leaders are also avoiding the issue of Trump's indictments. Perhaps they don't want to seem too delighted that Trump may end up in prison. Or perhaps they hope that Trump is the nominee because they perceive him as a weak candidate. Biden beat him in 2020. And Trump's insistence that the election was stolen was political poison for candidates in the 2018 midterm elections. Almost everyone who embraced the lie, lost.

The only other issue Trump can possibly run on is Biden's age - even though he is only three years younger. He will portray Biden as a bumbling idiot and will come up with nasty nicknames for all the other Republican candidates. Trump basically makes up what he calls the truth as he goes along and calls everything that contracts him or criticises him, false news. He'll say that Biden has been an ineffectual president and accomplished nothing - which is fake news.

Although he called Putin's putting troops on the Ukraine border a brilliant military strategy, he can't come out in support of Putin in the Ukraine war without losing votes from both parties and independents. He can't bring up his Supreme Court nominations without reminding everyone that those justices ended a 50-year old guarantee of abortion rights by striking down Roe v. Wade since a majority of voters believe the court was wrong to strike down the abortion ban. That issue lost Republicans many votes in 2022. He can't bring up the 2020 election without alienating voters on all fronts because few believe him and that claim will elicit the image of the 6 January attack on the Capitol. So he's left with Make America

*"It's also not out of the question to think that Trump's candidacy could lead to the Republican Party splitting in two"*

Better Again.

At this writing, Trump is the presumed leader in the race with about 41% of the vote. His most competitive opponent is Florida Governor Ron DeSantis (18%) who is also grabbing the "weaponisation" of the justice system as a major campaign issue. He cites that Hillary Clinton was not prosecuted for using a private email server and neither Biden nor

former vice-president Mike Pence were charged when a few documents were found in their homes. But they cooperated and there is no real comparison.

## LOYAL ACOLYTE

In some ways DeSantis is Trump 2.0. He was a loyal acolyte to the former president until his own presidential dreams became apparent. But in many ways, he is worse than Trump. He is not bombastic. He is well-spoken and can appear to be thoughtful and intelligent. On the other hand, he's worse than Trump because he's smarter, younger, and more attractive, and his actions as governor of Florida are downright scary. He promoted and signed what is known as the "don't say gay" law. It prohibits instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity in Florida schools before the fourth grade and requires the instruction to be "age appropriate" thereafter. In addition, last year, Florida became the first state to make it easier for parents to ban books in school libraries that they deem to be pornographic or that deal inappropriately with racial issues. Books such as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and even a story about two male penguins raising a chick in a zoo have been banned.

Even *The Hill We Climb*, the poem that Amanda Gorman wrote for Biden's inauguration was banned in Miami Dade county. And other states have followed Florida's lead in book banning. DeSantis is adamantly opposed to abortion and signed a law that bans abortion after six weeks of pregnancy, a time most women don't even know they are pregnant. Clearly his judicial nominations would be as bad, if not worse than Trump's. And perhaps DeSantis may also have legal problems. It was just reported by the Washington Post that his administration sent \$92m to a political supporter of the governor who donated a golf simulator to the governor's mansion and \$361,000 to political groups that helped elect DeSantis.

Like 2016, the Republican field is extremely crowded. After Trump and DeSantis, the most recent polls gave Christie about 9%. Pence comes in next with 7%. Three hopefuls have 3% support: Nikki Haley, African American Senator Tim Scott of South Carolina, and Vivek Ramaswamy, a biopharmaceutical entrepreneur who is a billionaire and could fund his own campaign.

The rest are barely known: Ryan Binkley, a Dallas businessman and pastor; Doug Burgum, the governor of North Dakota; Larry Elder, a conservative media personality from California; Perry Johnson, who couldn't even get on the ballot to run for Michigan Governor; Frances Suarez, the mayor of Miami, Florida; and Governor Hutchinson.

Trump is counting on the crowded field to splinter the



vote and secure his nomination. It's also not out of the question to think that Trump's candidacy could lead to the Republican Party splitting in two.

The last time there was such a crowded field the primary "debates" were not much more than a free-for-all bout of shouting and name calling. The Republican National Committee limited the debate to the top 10 candidates in 2016. To qualify for what is the first debate on 23 August the candidates must have donations from at least 40,000 national donors, consistently poll above 1%, and have "at least 200 unique donors per state or territory in 20 plus states or territories". They have until 21 August to meet the criteria. If too many qualify, the RNC is considering splitting the group into two debates.

As a comparison, in June 2007, Obama had about 21% of the Democratic votes compared to Hillary Clinton's 33%. And Obama not only became the candidate but also won the presidency. In June of 2015, Jeb Bush had 19% of the vote and Trump had 12%. Which is to say, no one can really predict who will get the nomination so early in the race.

Of course, the question is whether any of them can beat Biden. Is Biden's age such a liability that he doesn't stand a chance? I'm a cradle Democrat and I wish Biden had decided not to run. I worry that too many people are skeptical about having an 80-year-old president - because I am concerned, not so much about his abilities as his electability. A majority of Democrats did not want him to run again. I wish he had given vice-president Kamala Harris a more prominent and visible role, setting her up to run.

I will vote for him on election day if he stays in the race, but will his age keep other voters away from the polls? He not only needs Democrats, but also independents to be elected and it's too early to know how they will vote. Biden's campaign must focus on what he has accomplished (such as his handling of the pandemic, the infrastructure legislation, the inflation reduction act) and the danger to democracy if Republican's take control of Congress and the White House.

## SCARY CANDIDATES

Perhaps voter turnout will depend on how scary the Republican candidate is. The race may come down to personalities—and personal attacks.

The Democrats will most likely push the same agenda as in 2018—abortion rights, the threat of a Republican controlled government to American democracy, and Biden's handling of the Covid pandemic.

Republicans will try to bring up the Democrats' mishandling of the economy because of the need to raise the debt ceiling. They ignore the fact that the debt was higher under Trump because of his tax cuts for the rich. They'll also attack the fairness of the Department of Justice's handling of prosecution of Trump and not Democrats. One of the Republican targets has been Hunter Biden who was accused of tax evasion. Perhaps trying to avoid those attacks, the younger Biden recently pleaded guilty to not paying past taxes and paid his bill and penalties. He was not given any jail time, but many legal commentators said his prosecution was far more aggressive than the proceedings against most taxpayers.

After his arraignment, Trump vowed to stay no matter what. A few commentators have suggested that the underlying message he's giving supporters is that if he ever gets into the White House again, he'll never leave. The 6 January insurrection made it clear that there is one addiction that Trump can't kick - power. He's also got a small army of people who not only support him, but think he is the lawful president. And some of these people are willing to use violence and lethal weapons to put him in the White House. That is the most dangerous and terrifying part of this election.

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Martha Elliott has been a journalist for 45 years and is the author of several books on the US constitution and political process. She has also been active in Democratic politics and was on the board of Democratic Women of Santa Barbara County and works on Democratic campaigns in Maine where she now lives



# DOUBLE STANDARDS HAUNT THE BALKANS

## Minorities in Serbia are rarely heard from but have grievances similar to those in Kosovo, says Ragmi Mustafi

The relationship between Kosovo and Serbia has been marked by tensions, conflicts, and an ongoing quest for recognition, peace and stability. While much attention has been focused on the situation in northern Kosovo, it is crucial to shed light on the double standards and hypocrisy that favour this specific region over the Albanian national minority in Presevo Valley (southern Serbia).

I will highlight the discrepancies in international approaches, and discuss the need for a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to address the concerns of all stakeholders involved.

Kosovo, a predominantly ethnic Albanian territory, declared independence from Serbia in 2008. The population of Kosovo is characterised by its ethnic diversity. Albanians form the majority, comprising approximately 93% of the population. The Serbian community constitutes around 4% of the population. In addition to Albanians and Serbians, Kosovo is home to various other minority groups, which make up about 3% of the population. These minority communities include Roma, Bosniaks, Turks, Egyptians, and Gorani.

With the most advanced legal framework of treating minorities in Balkan this includes power-sharing and decentralisation guarantees. For example: The Assembly of Kosovo has 120 members in total. Of these, 20 seats are guaranteed for non-majority communities. Half of these are reserved for the Serb national minority and the other half for other communities.

However, Serbia refuses to recognise the Kosovo declaration of independence, considering Kosovo an integral part of its sovereign territory. This longstanding dispute has led to numerous diplomatic standoffs, impeding the progress of both Kosovo and Serbia in various aspects, such as economic development, regional stability and long-lasting peace.

Serbia, which caused four wars in the western Balkan during the 1990s, has a very narrow centralised legal framework of treating national minorities. Various reports (Annual Progress report of the EU, Report of the Council of Europe on Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Serbia of the US State Department) have found violations of fundamental human rights, and discrimination in the treatment of the rights of national minorities.

For the Albanian community in Serbia these issues include the passivation of addresses – meaning that ethnic Albanians have their addresses declared invalid by the police, which in the Serbian system de facto removes the right to identity documents and therefore

all of the rights of citizenship.

My office documented thousands of people affected, mostly who live or work in Kosovo but also Albanians who live where they have always lived. Independent campaigners have amassed a huge database of cases – the Serbian state denies that these people exist.

### HATE SPEECH

Another issue is hate speech by high officials, including the former minister of defence and interior, Aleksandar Vulin, who has repeatedly used the derogatory term ‘shiptar’ for ethnic Albanians (the equivalent of calling or Pakistani people ‘Paki’). I personally took minister Vulin to court for his use of offensive language, but – contradicting an earlier ruling in a case by an independent Serbian human rights CSO – the High Court in Belgrade found his use was not hate speech, despite him even using the term in official press releases.

The lack of condemnation by the courts has emboldened the print and online mass media to persistently use this term to describe Albanians from Kosovo or south Serbia. This adds to the daily diet of hatred and language of impending war that Serb people are fed by media in Belgrade that supports the ruling party of President Aleksandar Vučić.

These two points demonstrate the lack of real comprehensive democracy, and conversely limitations on freedom of expression in the mass media. At the same time that the then defence minister was due to appear in court to answer my complaint, I received a criminal summons for flying the Albanian flag on Albanian National Day at the offices of the Albanian National Council in Bujanovac.

Flying the flags of other states is forbidden from public buildings in Serbia, even in multi-ethnic municipalities where this was allowed in Yugoslav times, and despite the constitution recognising Serbia as a multi-ethnic state.

There is also the exclusion of Albanians from state institutions (for example: The Assembly of Serbia has 150 members in total. Of these just one seat is a representative of Albanian community). The southernmost municipalities in Serbia Bujanovac and Presevo are overwhelmingly Albanian populated, while there remains a small Albanian population in Medvedja, next to Kosovo, after passivisation of most Albanian addresses there.

When analysing the international response to the Kosovo-Serbia situation, it becomes evident that a disproportionate emphasis has been placed on the situation in northern Kosovo, while the grievances of the national minority in Serbia have received considerably less attention.

This imbalance has perpetuated a sense of injustice among Albanian citizens in Serbia and highlights a striking double standard in addressing minority issues.

The focus on Northern Kosovo, which consists of a predominantly Serbian population, has been a significant aspect of international efforts to stabilise the region. The concerns primarily revolve around the potential for secession or annexation, which could lead to the redrawing of borders and further destabilisation in the Balkans. However, it is crucial to emphasise that the well-being and rights of other minority groups should not be disregarded or overshadowed in this process.

One notable agreement in the context of normalising relations between Kosovo and Serbia is the path to normalisation, informally known as the Ohrid Agreement. Mediated by the European Union, this agreement aims to establish diplomatic normalisation between the Republic of Kosovo and the Republic of Serbia. While the agreement was verbally accepted by Kosovar prime minister Albin Kurti and Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić in February 2023, challenges remain in its implementation.

The agreement is significant as reaching a comprehensive agreement with Kosovo is a requirement for Serbia to join the European Union.

However, tensions have risen, particularly due to the delay in implementing the Association of Serbian Municipalities in Kosovo, which was part of the previous dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia from 2013. And differently interpreted by the two sides.

It is important for all parties involved to continue working towards resolving these issues and ensuring the well-being and rights of all minority groups in Kosovo, including the Serbian population. Open and constructive dialogue, supported by international mediation, can contribute to finding mutually acceptable solutions and promoting stability and inclusivity in the region.

Within Serbia, several national minority groups, including ethnic Hungarians, Bosniaks, Croats, Roma, and Albanians face challenges related to discrimination, political representation, and cultural preservation.

Unfortunately, the voices and concerns of these minority communities have often been marginalised or ignored.

In the case of the Albanian community, there have been three agreements between the government of Serbia and the Albanian representatives, aimed at addressing the issues in the Presevo Valley. However, the Serbian government has so far refused to implement any of these, despite the willingness of the Albanians in the Presevo Valley to integrate and seek a resolution. This situation arises after the war between the Liberation Army for Presevo, Bujanovac, and Medvedja and Serbian paramilitary and military

*“In the complex and sensitive context of the Kosovo-Serbia situation, the international community’s response has been marred by hypocrisy”*

forces in 2001 due to repression by Milosevic Serbia, and a desire to join liberated Kosovo. This was almost the last armed conflict of the ‘Yugoslav wars’.

To address the failure to implement past agreements, political representatives of the Albanian community have called for the inclusion of the Presevo Valley issue in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue. They argue that treating the issue as part of the overall normalisation

process between Kosovo and Serbia would ensure unified standards in the treatment of minorities and contribute to long-lasting peace.

The selective attention and inconsistent responses of the international community to minority issues based on geopolitical calculations raise valid concerns about the fairness and consistency of their approach.

The handling of minority rights and the Presevo Valley issue should be addressed consistently and without bias, promoting equal rights, representation, and cultural preservation for all minority communities in Serbia. For example after early progress on integration of Albanians into the state, Serb national and regional authorities have almost entirely stopped employing ethnic Albanians for the last 10 years. There are no Albanians in the regional hospital; none in motorway toll booths; declining numbers in the police and customs; few in former state enterprises, ownership of which are still closely linked to influence with the ruling Serbian Progressive Party. These concrete grievances in south Serbia get far less attention than agitation in north Kosovo. All citizens lose out because of the lack of development in both regions.

In the complex and sensitive context of the Kosovo-Serbia situation, the international community’s response has been marred by hypocrisy, raising questions about the consistency and fairness of their approach. The glaring discrepancies in their handling of the issue undermine the principles of equality and justice, leaving other minority groups marginalised and their concerns disregarded.

One of the primary concerns is the selective attention given to minority issues based on geopolitical calculations rather than a genuine commitment to fairness. The level of engagement and support varies depending on political interests, creating a perception of bias and undermining the principles of impartiality. This has been particularly apparent during the intense diplomatic efforts to persuade Serbian leaders to support the Western position against Russia on its invasion of Ukraine.

Moreover, double standards are evident in the international community’s approach. While Kosovo’s independence was supported and recognised, the aspirations and concerns of other minority communities within Serbia, such as the Albanians in the Presevo Valley, have been largely ignored.

continued on Page 20

# WRETCHED RATCHET FOR RENTS

Unless a rent tribunal system is restored private sector tenants will face endless rent increases and continued insecurity, says William Tranby

In political circles much of the last year has been taken up with the cost-of-living crisis. The Bank of England was slow off the mark in raising interest rates to curb demand in the economy, but this was always going to have a limited effect on inflation when the inflationary pressures were triggered by the Ukraine war. The conflict interrupted energy supplies from Russia and food exports from both Ukraine and Russia.

Raising interest rates is the only lever the Bank has, but it was always going to have little effect on the cost of living, because the root cause of inflation was not too much demand chasing too few finished goods in the market place, but because the supply of the basics was artificially restricted by war.

The Government rightly intervened on the cost of energy, moderating the effects on consumers and to a lesser extent on businesses. Belatedly it has asked the big supermarkets to consider introducing voluntary price caps on basic foods, which I do not believe will make much of a dent, if at all, on family shopping bills.

## SCANDALOUS RENTS

The third ingredient to the cost-of-living crisis has been largely ignored by most political parties. Increasing mortgage costs has been lamented by a few politicians, but with no expectation of a Government intervention to soften the blow to household budgets. Even more scandalous has been the consequential increase in rents, especially private sector rents.

Since 2020, social rents have been capped at CPI plus 1%. Based on this calculation, social renters faced a maximum rent increase of 4.1% from April 2022. Under these rent cap rules, social rents could have increased by over 11% from April 2023. However, in the November autumn statement the Government intervened to cap social rents at 7% for 2023-24. No such luck for the private rented sector.

The BBC reported via its website that rents for new private sector lets had increased by 11.1% in January 2023 compared to the same month a year before. This figure varied greatly across the UK, with London rents increasing by 15.2%. Rightmove reported that national average asking rents outside London reached a new record of £1,190 per calendar month (pcm), and average asking rents in London surpassed £2,500 pcm for the first time to reach a new record.

According to Wikipedia the Rent Act 1977 was the last piece of legislation in England and Wales to place limits on how much landlords could raise prices for residential homes. It was substantially repealed by the

Housing Act 1988.

The UK once had a functioning rent tribunal system to set rents according to local market conditions.

My first piece of casework in the 1970s, when still a student and before I first became a councillor in 1982, involved helping a tenant compose a statement for a tribunal hearing. In those days a landlord could only increase a rent in a leasehold property above the inflation rate if they could prove an investment in the property to benefit the tenant, such as a new gas cooker, or improved bathroom. My help helped to moderate the rent increase saving the tenant a pound a week.

After the 1988 Act, the old tribunal system disappeared. Rent levels could still be challenged by assured shorthold tenants during the first six months of the tenancy, if a tenant believed the rent was more than the current market rent for their property. In this case they could refer the rent to the Rent Assessment Panel for review. However, tenants stopped using this mechanism because landlords would simply issue a section 21 notice of possession or a section 21 eviction. This is the notice which a landlord must give to their tenant to begin the process to take possession of a property let on an assured shorthold tenancy, without needing to provide a reason for wishing to take possession.

A section 21 notice should be renamed the ultimate Catch-22 for private sector tenants. Because whatever they try to do the landlord always wins.

There is a possibility that energy bills might be lower in the next few months or years as alternative energy sources are developed, and food prices might dip a little if transport and energy costs are lowered and/or the Ukraine war is concluded. If general inflation drops, then lower interest rates will benefit mortgage holders. But the chances of private sector rents going backwards are close to zero.

This is why politicians of all stripes, including Liberal Democrats, should be looking at restoring an effective rent tribunal system, alongside ending no fault evictions, to allow an independent arbitration mechanism to regulate rents in each neighbourhood.

With IT having moved on a lot from the 1970s it would be possible for a database to be constructed with existing rents registered by postcode in each area, with proposals for new rent increases being determined according to local market conditions and the quality of the accommodation being offered.

## NATIONAL FREEZE

To move to such a system would require new primary legislation, and as part of any proposal there should be an initial national rent freeze while the new bureaucracy was created. I suspect this would need to be at least a year but it may need to be longer for logistical reasons.

I would suggest that the new function should be a responsibility of local district councils, and the cost of running tribunals should be recouped from the landlords each time they are required to attend for individual cases. The more reasonable landlords would not have their tenants triggering so many hearings, and would therefore not need to pay out regularly for the resulting judgements.

My reason for suggesting that this function should be the responsibility of district councils is because they already have interventionist powers to require landlords to improve their properties when they fall below minimum standards, and therefore a cohort of council officers, who can inspect accommodation, already exists to carry out part of the tribunals' work.

The argument against restoring an effective rent tribunal system would be the same one used to introduce the 1988 Act in the first place. By changing the balance of power in favour of landlords the Thatcher Government wanted the private rented sector to flourish while it deliberately cut back on social housing through council house sales, and by recycling the sale receipts into the Treasury's coffers rather than compensate the councils to rebuild any replacement social housing.

The reverse effect of my proposal could of course happen. The private rented sector could shrink as it becomes less profitable, and a glut of housing would be released onto the market. House prices would fall making a purchase for first time buyers more achievable. Also, councils could buy up released housing and refurbish it for social rent.

I am not bothered about any claim saying I am trying to return to the 1970s. Housing costs then were a lot less than they are now. Figures compiled by Schroders suggest that the cost of a house was 4.0 times average earnings in 1978 and 8.5 times in 2020.

Many commentators now believe that the change in demographics in the UK, with only a small minority of people under 40 buying their homes compared to the majority of people over 40 being homeowners, is changing the attitudes of millennials and their voting behaviour at the expense of the Tories.

Quite right too, most of our readers will say. But this same generation still needs to find some answers from politicians to our booming cost of housing, whether purchasing property with the bank of mum and dad, or privately renting. A party that comes up with some answers along the lines I have outlined might pick up more votes than others from this important next generation.

*“If general inflation drops, then lower interest rates will benefit mortgage holders. But the chances of private sector rents going backwards are close to zero”*

The lone voice I have heard from Labour ranks arguing for rent regulation was Sadiq Khan's. Labour's national spokespeople were more concerned about finding another scheme to help first time buyers. A party like the Liberal Democrats should be tackling the problem at source.

Most people under 40 cannot feasibly get on the housing ladder while paying exorbitant rent, (as well as their student loan), and save for a 10% deposit. The maths simply doesn't work. There must be another way.

William Tranby is a member of the Liberator Collective

Continued from Page 18

The marginalisation of minority voices further exacerbates the problem.

### EXCLUSIONARY APPROACH

Despite the willingness of the Albanians in the Presevo Valley to integrate and seek a resolution, their concerns have been overshadowed in international discussions. This exclusionary approach perpetuates a sense of bias against certain communities.

Compounding the issue is the lack of accountability for implementing agreements and fulfilling commitments. The international community's failure to hold all parties accountable erodes trust and perpetuates a cycle of unfulfilled promises.

To address these concerns, it is imperative for the international community to rectify these inconsistencies and biases. By upholding principles of equality, justice, and inclusivity, they can contribute to a more sustainable and just resolution. It is essential to ensure that the voices and concerns of all minority groups, including the Albanians in the Presevo Valley, are heard and taken into account.

Achieving true equality and fostering social cohesion necessitates the recognition and protection of the cultural, linguistic, and political rights of all minority groups in Serbia. Only through a consistent and fair approach can a lasting and peaceful resolution be achieved in the Kosovo-Serbia situation. This can only be accomplished through inclusive dialogue and a steadfast commitment to upholding international principles.

By striking a balance between Serbian community in Kosovo and Albanian community in Serbia, we can pave the way for genuine progress, healing the wounds of the past and building a brighter future for all communities impacted by the Kosovo-Serbia situation and mutual recognition.

Ragmi Mustafi is former president of the Albanian National Minority Council, an official state recognised body in Serbia

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**IN AGREEMENT**

*Dear Liberator*

When I'm being attacked by someone who seeks to deny basic human rights to others, I generally feel confirmation that I'm right. This is generally the case with transphobes ('Protected Beliefs' Liberator 417 letters).

In this instance it is also notable for being a rare instance where I am entirely in agreement with Sir Edward Davey.

Gareth Epps  
West Oxfordshire

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**BAAH HUMBUG**

*Dear Liberator*

Your story (Liberator 417) about Lewes candidate Janet Baah said: "What's in a name? One ward in Lewes this May had Lib Dem candidates called Janet Baah and John Lamb."

Afraid this story is four years old, the Baah/Lamb ticket stood in 2019. Both were elected to Lewes Town Council that year. This May (2023) Janet Baah stood again for both town and Lewes District Council, sadly John Lamb chose not to re-stand this time round but supported Janet who not only won re-election to the town council but also won a seat on the district council for the Lib Dems, gaining a Green Party held seat.

The 'Baah Lamb' posters in 2019 were only rivalled by posters for my own election campaign that same year.

Rob Banks  
Plumpton Green

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**August in Kabul - America's Last Days in Afghanistan**  
by Andrew W Quilty

The West's disorderly pull out of Afghanistan in August 2021 is brought vividly to life in a recent book by Andrew W. Quilty, an Australian journalist based in Kabul who bore witness to the collapse of a reforming but inherently corrupt Afghan government propped up by the West and its replacement by the return of the totalitarian theocracy of the Taliban.

The author's lucid account is based on almost one hundred interviews with witnesses to the conflagration who tell their tales about that fateful month – from a young woman dreaming to go to university, a prisoner escaping from detention at an empty Bagram airbase, a presidential aide fleeing the Arg Presidential Palace, to US Marines at the Hamid Karzai International Airport, restraining huge crowds of Afghans, desperate to escape after the fall of the capital.

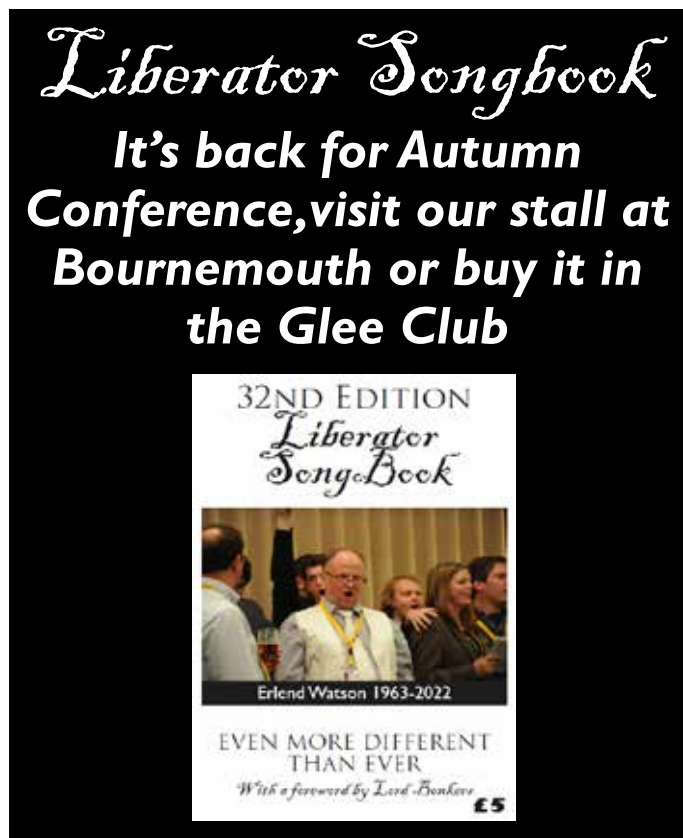
Quilty gives a short history of the twenty years of fighting and nation-building (which NATO Jens Stoltenberg is reported to have lamented afterwards as having been way over-ambitious). Exasperated by the lack of sufficient progress in transforming the country and faced with a never-ending war, the US held negotiations with the Taliban in Doha to end the impasse. Trump's February 2020 US-Taliban Doha Agreement, reached without the participation of the Afghan government - confirmed by Biden - effectively sealed the country's fate.

Biden's reassurances in June 2021 that all would be well, came when resistance to the Taliban was already crumbling. Agreed deadlines for US withdrawal from Afghanistan allowed the Taliban to sit pretty in Doha while their fighters gained ground on the battlefield against the collapsing morale of the Afghan government forces and its militias, increasingly bereft of US military support.

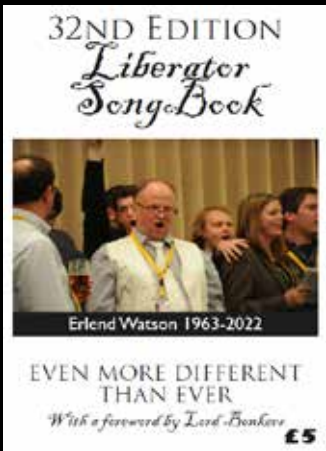
The fall of Kabul certainly revealed President Ashraf Ghani was no Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Ghani famously said in an interview in UAE shortly afterwards that he fled by helicopter "in a vest, shoes and a T-shirt and I didn't take anything else with me" as the Taliban entered Kabul. Quilty reveals that Ghani did indeed take US\$200,000 in cash "ss per normal protocol" while it is said his administrative staff carried a further US\$500,000 in local currency in the four escaping helicopters.

The atmosphere at Kabul airport during the evacuation is well portrayed in the book. "From the moment I saw the Taliban in the palace, my only focus was how to survive, how to get out of Kabul" says our Arg Presidential Palace escapee. There was surge of people rushing to the airport to leave. "an incongruous relationship was forged between US and other military forces inside the airport and the Taliban fighters outside, parties that had been fighting one another for two decades". For two weeks, until 31 August 2021, evacuation flights brought out those with western passports or visas. Many who should have got out, were left behind; some who did not deserve to be evacuated, found easy passage.

In a country where its people had become prone to hide or embellish the truth to gain favour from Westerners in particular, Quilty has done his best



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to authenticate the stories of those he has interviewed and rejected implausible accounts of what happened. His carefulness is revealed when he weighs the evidence whether the apparent gunshot wounds of many Afghan civilians killed at the time of ISKP's (Islamic State of Khorasan Province) improvised explosive device explosion by the airport was caused by US soldiers' indiscriminate fire – and decided he could reach no conclusion.

Happily, despite the title of this book, the story does not fall into the habit - as many such books about US global military interventions do - of ignoring the considerable contribution made by US allies.

Nation-building in Afghanistan was an immense exercise which involved the whole 'international community' (by which is meant the West), coordinated as best it could by the United Nations and including the largely bank-rolling role of the European Union, both briefly acknowledged in the book. The reader is reminded that NATO's International Security Assistance Force military



# REVIEWS

contingent comprised 51 nations at its height. Many countries sent soldiers to participate in the evacuation effort of their nationals and others, all listed in the book.

To this day, Afghans left behind who were closely associated with the former government, its military forces and civil society are being hunted down by the Taliban. This has meant many of us who have served in Afghanistan have also been active in helping getting people out when possible. Afghanistan should not be forgotten.

George Cunningham  
EU Deputy Ambassador to Afghanistan  
2016-18

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**Winning Here,  
Winning There: A  
Handbook for local  
Liberal Democrats  
by Christopher  
Hudson  
John Harper  
Publishing, £25**

There's nothing like a successful election campaign for winning new members and enthusing existing supporters to do more.

In the new Cumberland Liberal Democrats, the WhatsApp group is buzzing with ideas and discussion as success in unitary authority elections in May 2022 continued this month with campaigning for parish council seats to strengthen grassroots contact with voters.

But how to guide new recruits



who ask what we do, when and why? That's what Christopher Hudson, former chair Southwark Liberal Democrats, attempts here. His book is "ordered to take you from your first ever executive meeting to winning or defending control of your council, regional authority, or parliamentary seat".

So that's why he kicks off with chapters on setting up or rebuilding local parties, on growing membership and even managing the occasional volunteer who is member of the awkward squad.

It may, therefore, have seemed natural to then consider navigating party conferences and policymaking and go on to setting out the structure of the party and its constituent parts.

But, as the aching feet of members of the 'leaflet delivery cult' testify, what we're about is getting our message across, and this all feels rather dry compared with the front-line task of convincing people to vote Lib Dem.

So, for me, page 98 is where to turn to, to learn about what to keep in mind when preparing a local leaflet or setting out to canvass your neighbours.

Key, and spelled out clearly, is that you are not going to win every vote. Focusing first on existing supporters, then using data to work out how many votes on top you need and who you can get by hard campaigning is crucial advice for inexperienced doorknockers and a useful reminder for veterans.

Vacuous those three-word slogans 'Taking back control' and 'Get Brexit done' were - on top of the '£350m for the NHS' lie on the Brexit bus - but we do need to acknowledge that, as Hudson puts it: "The electorate are not as political as you ... so take this into consideration in your communications with the public."

So it is wise not to deliver political tracts to people who have limited time to think about an election. As Hudson says: "The simplest, most resonating message is the one that they are going to remember when it comes to their time at the ballot box."

Between now and the general election, we must hone a message for the whole of the UK. Hudson is right that localism is not a political position "but local care and attention". And it has been sorely

neglected by the Conservatives and too little understood by Labour. But it is potholes left unrepaired and sewage pumped into our rivers that catch the attention of voters.

On page 121 then, and in my view too late in a book of 268 pages, we get to the art of canvassing.

There's useful stuff for campaign managers on making sure people don't go out alone on dark nights, on making it fun to pick up a paper map and address list, or download a MiniVan walk, and head out in a team. And we all need to know not to get angry back with the already angry, but to also listen and convince rather than argue. And if you'll never to get that vote, move on.

I suspect much of the information in this book is freely available from the party and especially the ALDC, and that there are training days when experience tells in communicating that 'what we do, when and why'. But Hudson's book may well find its way onto many a Lib Dem member's bookshelf, to be dipped into, and that can be no bad thing.

Paul Nettleton

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## **Return of the Junta, why Myanmar's military must go back to the barracks by Oliver Slow Bloomsbury Academic 2023**

A useful background to the situation in Myanmar, where the expectations of western political correctness doesn't always match the situation on the ground. One might question a 'return' of the Junta, the 'Tawmadaw'; did they ever really go away, with their entrenched positions in Parliament; the National League for Democracy (NLD) probably deserves better.

One might be inclined to see a coup d'état as a better armed robber baron simply taking over, but the Myanmar military, effectively a caste in itself, sees its role as a guarantor of the country, which (forgetting imperial boundaries) it created. Initially siding with the Japanese in World War II, they switched sides to the British, who never really regained control of the country, although it wasn't formally independent

until 1948. Burma did not join the Commonwealth.

The problem with this is that after years of military rule, the Tawmadaw has its fingers directly or indirectly in most sectors of the economy; cronyism and corruption are rife, much of it linked to Communist China.

Armed rebellion has, to some extent, always been endemic, particularly amongst the freedom loving ethnic minorities of the country, now joined by NLD groups, leaving a situation where the army has little or no control over areas of the country and increasingly asserts itself through air power – hence the Burma Campaign's focus on banning Britain's role in the supply of aviation fuel, particularly through insuring the tankers. Worry your MP on this – there's an election coming.

Stewart Rayment

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## **Memory Makers – The Politics of the Past in Putin's Russia by Jade McGlynn. Bloomsbury £20**

Writing in the aftermath of the Prigozhin/Wagner Group rebellion, it is striking how Putin's PR offensive seemed to confirm his popularity among the Russian people – even though he was fundamentally, and possibly irretrievably weakened by the rebellion and the perception of his fallibility. The reason for his support is explained in Jade McGlynn useful and informative book about how Putin uses a re-writing of history as part of his creation of a Russian identity to suit his objectives.

While written before the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, this book shows how a pattern of behaviour adapts and distorts historical facts and narratives, thereby creating this identity which provides legitimacy for the actions of the present. Indeed McGlynn argues convincingly that the Kremlin's activities and rhetoric made the invasion of Ukraine "perhaps the only possible outcome of Russia's preoccupation with policing the past".

There are three core narratives which are used by the Kremlin to formulate support: the significance

of the Great Patriotic War of 1941-45 and the victory over Nazism; a chaos caused by the lack of a strong state in the 1990s; and the resurgence of Russia as a great power.

To this can be added by importance of strong leaders such as Catherine the Great, Peter the Great and Stalin, and by extension Putin. It is striking, for example, how Putin has been at pains to term the Ukrainians and their leaders as Nazis and the invasion as a fight for the survival of Russia itself.

The book demonstrates the role the media and the education system are playing in promoting the Kremlin's vision of the past – its intervention in Syria re-established Russia as a global power, the Cold War which had been 'won' (conveniently ignoring the collapse of the Soviet Empire) – but, says McGlynn, the Kremlin is not dictating history, so much as appropriating it, setting parameters within which Putin's version of history can be set.

This is, perhaps, where warning bells should ring for those outside Russia. In the US, over half of Republican voters still believe the 2020 US presidential election was 'stolen' and media outlets are keen to propound such nonsense, and in the UK, the existence of truth seems less politically meaningful than the existence of a good tweet or headline.

Hegel was wrong: it is not the case that we can learn nothing from history; in fact, we can learn anything from history, so long as we are the people who write it. And if we write it, we can weaponise it and use it to help shape the future.

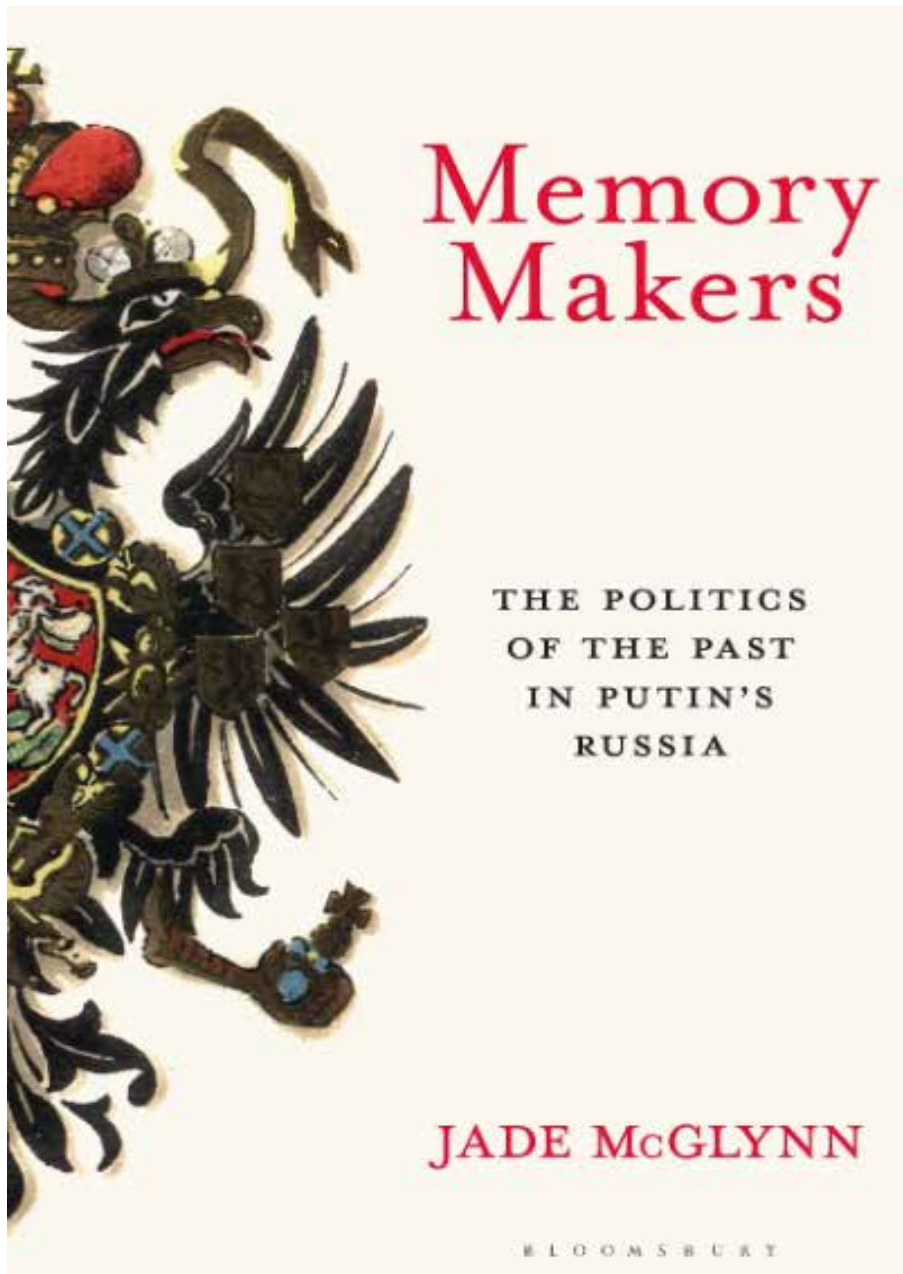
Nick Winch

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## The Roots of American Individualism, political myth in the Age of Jackson

by Alex Zakaras  
Princeton University Press 2022

Individualism is a philosophical position that sees the individual as the core element of society, realising its goals through independence and self-reliance. As such it can be found across a wide spectrum of non-collectivist



and non-corporatist ideologies and philosophies, though it may be a strange bed-fellow with some.

It pervades Classical Liberalism and remains central to modern Liberalisms. It occurs naturally where circumstances nurture it, and the United States - having ostensibly thrown of feudalism and privilege - would be a perfect seeding ground.

Political labels in American politics can be confusing when contrasted with those in the more stable European experience. Are Democrats or Republicans on the progressive or conservative side of the political spectrum, and has that always been the position?

Indeed, it has been a state of flux since the political groupings of the aftermath of the War of Independence, and primarily in the following age of Jackson.

Politicians had to address an electorate of primarily white male farmers, of necessity, largely self-sufficient and hence primarily focused on their own immediate concerns. The individualism that stems from that will colour most political persuasions and lives on in the background mythology of the American psyche to this day.

American history is not widely followed in Britain, we pay scant attention to our own history in education these days. The period between the end of the Napoleonic wars and the American Civil War, is particularly neglected. Jackson came to our attention when Donald Trump was elected president, Jackson being the first of a line of presidents after the founding fathers that few had heard of, until you get to Lincoln. His presidency, 1829-37 is noted for its belligerence



and the destruction of Native American communities.

Jefferson, not alone among the founding fathers, as a proto-liberal, fails to see the contradictions in that and as a slave owner and as an elitist does not fully grasp the implications of democracy. Industrialisation is a new kind of feudalism, otherwise not yet thrown off in Europe.

As an agrarian economy, land-plenty, the American farmer owns his land and is self-sufficient on it. Jackson speaks to them against the elites, banks and like collective agencies. The economic cost of this is paid by Black slaves and Native Americans of course; does this lead to some of the darker overtones of American politics?

Though beloved of Trump, Jackson is a Democrat, but is a mass democratic sense, no longer patrician. You can see the links, though the Democrats, as a modern party, can equally trace their roots back to Jackson and this period. Against the elites, who it turns out, acted in their own self-interest, egalitarian politics simply required common sense and a personal integrity. Where did Trump go wrong?

A detailed study of the period, Zakaras shows us the roots of what one might call the American mindset and the apparent paradoxes of political support.

Stewart Rayment

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## **The New Cold War by Gilbert Achcar Saqi Books London 2023.**

This could be pigeonholed as a book saying “I told you so in a New Cold War twenty years ago”, and “It’s all America’s fault”.

But this analysis by Professor Achcar is much more sophisticated than that. Two chapters are reprinted from 25 and 24 years ago (bringing us to the period after the Kosovo war) and two new ones are added.

It is a left wing analysis on US / Russia / China, with the subtitle ‘The United States, Russia and China from Kosovo to Ukraine’. I suspected when asked to review that this might be the classic Euro Marxist “it’s all America’s fault” or worse a simple far left apology for

authoritarian regimes.

However having read the author’s profile it was immediately apparent that not only are his book titles at least clever and thoughtful, but Achcar seems to have eclectic and broad knowledge. That is confirmed by my reading of the book, especially the two new chapters and the overview and concluding remarks. Chapter 3, ‘Vladimir the Terrible: an opera in five acts’ is a masterful account of the rise of Vladimir Putin and the real and imaginary threats that he has posed. It may be my stereotype but the professor appears to be a classic European-Middle Eastern intellectual Marxist, which means he has some balance to criticise all sides from a different perspective. Achcar is from Lebanon (born in Senegal) and has taught and researched at prestigious universities in Paris, Berlin, and since 2007 the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. The text is also very well referenced with a wide range of sources – think tank, journalistic, scholarly, experts, and from different disciplines, for example left wing and more conservative, philosophy and economics. There is no academic snobbery here.

The work does demonstrate that Achcar was one of the very first to use the term the New Cold War in print, which would have seemed very pessimistic to me at the time in 1998.

The book is biased against America, NATO and ‘the West’, concentrating on their political failures and critiquing their involvement in Bosnia, Kosovo and Serbia (Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya more fairly). The narrative all the time seems to suggest that using force to end the war in Bosnia and to try to stop atrocities in Kosovo was US NATO adventurism.

In the later chapters it is true that human rights and individual concerns get more focus, fundamentally however this is a book about relations between states, and Achcar subscribes to a very ‘great power’ oriented view where individuals (or small countries) have little agency. He does at least recognise the desires of Kosovo Albanians for self-determination, and of many citizens of Eastern and Central European

states not to be dominated by Russia.

Achcar supports the view that the US / Madeleine Albright were determined to bomb Serbia whatever. I’ve talked to a Scandinavian diplomat who explained the tireless work to avoid bombing, and heard it from a senior US diplomat. But also how could anything Milosevic said be trusted, just as how can anything Putin says be trusted. I’ve met and worked with the victims of their wars, including their own citizens in the case of Serbia. Edward Lucas in his 2008 *The New Cold War: Putin’s threat to Russia and the West* (revised 2014) did predict and point out much of the behaviour that Putin and his circle’s captured state have enacted, especially about energy politics.

Along with reviewing *The New Cold War*, by chance but for context reading *Shadowplay* by Tim Marshall, a journalistic political account about the Kosovo War and Serbia. I wish I had read these two books before going out to work for two and half years at the borders of Serbia, Kosovo and North Macedonia. At a broad economic and political level, and Marshall at European and regional one. Achcar’s earlier chapters fill in gaps in my knowledge and answer some enquiries that I still had, although I regularly disagree with his conclusions or political views. Marshall, like Achcar, favours the line that the bombing of Serbia was always going to happen; however while he was basically a journalist among Serbs in Serbia he presents information from all parties in an unbiased way.

Both confirm what I always thought was myth that the CIA were arming the Kosovo Liberation Army in advance – maybe a wise precaution but certainly having a horse in the race. It is also clear despite two decades of national myth that many Albanian citizens of Kosovo did not support armed violence, though they probably don’t recognise that now – equally it is clear that the reason for the violence was the repression by the Milosevic regime. The Serbian nationalist state mantra “Kosovo is Serbia” was the same as Ukraine government, UK and EU diplomats and politicians repeating “Crimea is Ukraine”, until Putin’s full scale

invasion of Ukraine. Putin and his followers are the cause of Russia's downfall and the inevitable return of Crimea to Ukraine after Ukraine wins the war.

The text is persuasive on three aspects. The key thing missed by many other analysts was the rise of China. That this is the key geo-political issue of the early 21st century is obvious and the author focuses on whether China can be encouraged to act in a peaceful way to its neighbours or will it resort to military action to assert itself.

In that regard the militaristic and confrontational language by some US leaders is not helpful. What happens will likely define the century. While disagreeing with the professor that states should not criticise human rights abuse in other countries, I agree that they should try and dial down talk of conflict. The focus on NATO expansion instead of pursuing cooperation and economic aid is thoroughly scrutinised. The book analyses the military spending in detail – what a waste of money.

Victims of Russia's / Soviet expansionism wanted to join NATO, and the Alliance has not attacked Russia. Achcar is clear to acknowledge that only Putin is responsible (at the initiation) for his War on Ukraine, but it is fair to say that a military based and aggressive economic policy by the US may have alienated parts of Russian society who earlier wanted engagement with 'the West'. The US is also deliberately opportunistic in encouraging swapping Russian to US energy for Europe.

I have recommended Achcar's book to media professional, Marcus Brogden, an expert on Turkey and Russia, who confirms from personal knowledge how traumatic the 1990s were for ordinary Russians and how Western Europe and America failed to help, but encouraged gung-ho capitalism that turned into carpet bagging privatisations.

Plenty of other sources document this, including Mark Galeotti in his *A Short History of Russia*. Those who want Russia to disintegrate after the war (including some Ukrainian nationalists and US hawks) should be careful what they wish for, and wary of making the mistakes that Keynes warned about after Versailles.

On the failure of America, Britain and allies to help Russia with a Marshall Plan under Gorbachev and Yeltsin I am delighted (though still sad) to find someone echoing what I have said always right from that time.

This is for me the biggest failure of political leadership of my lifetime and I will always blame Thatcher and Bush for this. They and hawks, cold warriors, many Liberal Democrats, wanted to say "we've won" and wouldn't take a chance to help Gorbachev and thus help a properly managed transition in the Soviet Union.

I've been working among the diplomatic community in the Western Balkans in the last three years and formed an increased respect and admiration for the diplomats. American and British (military) intelligence and diplomacy was right on Russia's invasion of Ukraine but have been wrong lots of other times – also hindered by political choices. Let's hope that after this, calm assessments are made and 'western' countries, especially the United States of America and the United Kingdom, think carefully about the hypocrisy and double standards that has been embedded in their foreign policies for seventy years almost always despite whoever has been in power.

How to move forward? Achcar prioritises the importance of the UN, but without ideas about how to achieve it apart from engaging all permanent members of the Security Council. He echoes the moral and logically unbeatable call of Nobel laureates to put military spending into peaceful development. Overall he is right that no one country or even oligarchy of them should try to dominate the World. That is wise advice to both the US and China, and whoever rises later in this century.

Kiron Reid

## Tuesday

Alarmed by tales of children identifying as cats, I telephone the headmistress of the village school and Matron at my own Home for Well-Behaved Orphans. Both assure me that there is nothing in the story: in short, it's Perfect Rot. I turn instead to my editorial for this week's High Leicestershire Radical and decide to give beans to those calling the Commons Privileges Committee a 'kangaroo court'. I make two points. The first is that respect for Parliament lies at the heart of our democracy. The second is that when, a couple of years ago, I had the misfortune to be confined in a zoo for some weeks – you may recall I wore a gorilla costume throughout my ordeal – I was impressed by the way the other animals would lay their disputes before the kangaroos. Somehow their antipodean informality ("She'll be right, mate") and mastery of courtroom procedure allowed these engaging marsupials to arrive at resolutions that both parties found fair. If I were Nadine Dorries (which I admit is unlikely) I should not relish facing the class action that the kangaroos of Queensland are bringing over certain of her dietary preferences in that programme where everyone is stranded in the jungle.

## Wednesday

I see the coming Labour man Wes Streeting is putting it about that his grandfather was a member of the London underworld in the Sixties. All I shall say on the subject is that if the old geezer was one of Violent Bonham Carter's boys, young Streeting would do well to keep schtum. His grandmother, incidentally, once shared a cell with Christine Keeler, who always struck me as a Terribly Nice Girl.

This afternoon I turn down an invitation to attend a 'fireside chat' by Danny Alexander at the National Liberal Club. Strictly between me and my diary, I am afraid the fire will go out. Then I ring my accountant and ask him to explore whether there would be tax advantages if the Well-Behaved Orphans did identify as cats.

## Thursday

When the Conservatives sold off our public utilities we were assured the new private operators would live in fear of their regulators. The mere mention of them, we were told, would send non-executive directors home to live quietly with their mothers. The reality has been that the regulators – Ofwat, Ofgem, Ofthis, Ofthat – have been treated by the operators with contumely and derision: I would be hard put to say which is the more disagreeable. This morning, as I walk by the shores of Rutland Water, the answer comes to me. We need a new regulatory body to monitor the performance of the regulators. I spend the rest of the day writing a paper for the Federal Policy Committee on my proposal for an Ofof.

## Friday

Spare a thought for local Conservative associations planning outings for their members: where can they take them nowadays? The Isle of Man lost its attraction when birching was abolished, while the Jack Straw Memorial Reform School, Dungeness, which also used to be a popular destination, is to be repurposed as a 'skills boot camp for the over-fifties'. The more affluent might think of Rwanda, but it looks unlikely that they will find any asylum seekers to gloat over when they get there.

# Lord Bonkers' Diary

I am told that charabanc trips to the coast have been booked in the hope that the hulks will soon be in place, but most Tory branches are likely to fall back on that old favourite: allowing their members to crawl on their bellies across the lawn of their nearest Old Etonian MP.

## Saturday

How splendid to have a Russell on the Liberal Democrat benches in the Lords again! Earl Russell won the by-election among hereditary peers, casually

giving a member of the Lloyd George clan one up the snoot in the process. My only worry is that he has mentioned more than once his dream of getting his father's big band back together and asked if I know what became of them. It happens that I gave them sanctuary on an island in Rutland Water after Conrad's death. From time to time I see them sporting on its shore in animal skins and playing upon rude instruments, and I know Meadowcroft rows out for the occasional jam session, but few others know of their presence. Will they thank me if I shatter their idyll? Can I continue to change the subject when my newest colleague broaches the matter?

## Sunday

To St Asquith's for Divine Service, with the happy consequence that I am not at Lord's to witness the appalling scenes in the Long Room. Reports are still coming in, but it seems the Australians' physiotherapist and reserve wicket keeper were lynched during the lunch interval. By all means let us play our cricket hard, but this was Going A Bit Far. Lord's should not be allowed to host another test until the MCC has proved it can control its members. If an alternative ground has to be found, then we need look no further than my own here at the Hall. I will even undertake to have the grounds thoroughly searched for big cats – ever since the sudden closure of my safari park there has been a tendency for boundary fielders to disappear when the bowling is from the Pavilion End.

## Monday

Soon it will be high summer and time to take the Well-Behaved Orphans on their annual holiday at Trescothick Bay in Cornwall, but before I see to that happy duty I have another to fulfil: a whistle-stop tour of current by-elections. First Selby, where a contest has been called following the resignation of one Nigel Adams – I know no more about him than you do. Then it will be off to Uxbridge, where I am told the locals are still celebrating the departure of Boris Johnson, before I call in at Somerton and Frome. Here our own Sarah Dyke is battling the forces of darkness. With a little strategic advice and practical help from you diarist, I fully expect her to triumph.

Finally, I shall hang my hat in Mid Bedfordshire, where a by-election has long been promised but has yet to materialise because the aforementioned Dorries refuses to make good her solemn oath to resign. If she does finally cop for the Chiltern Hundreds, then whichever Conservative is selected will face the unhappy task of defending their party's widely disliked, at least in Bedfordshire, 'Do Your Number Twos in the Great Ouse' campaign.

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