

# liberator



You can see Europe from here

Can Ed Davey?

Help! I'm trapped by someone talking about land value taxation

All part of the conference experience

It's time to vote on the pre-manifesto

I'm already asleep

All this sewage out here, so you've got my vote

- 🗳️ Poverty amid plenty - Sarah Green MP
- 🗳️ No time to be timid - David Grace, Paul Hindley
- 🗳️ What's gone wrong with housing - Roger Hayes, Matt Pennell

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## LIBERATOR

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Flat 1, 24 Alexandra Grove, London N4 2LF

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## INTERNET

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

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

# CONTENTS

Commentary.....	3
Radical Bulletin .....	4..7
<b>IT EVEN HAPPENS HERE .....</b>	<b>7</b>
Serious poverty can be found even in the outwardly affluent Chesham and Amersham constituency. Sarah Green reports	
<b>ONLY LOCAL HEROES .....</b>	<b>8..9</b>
Is stressing a candidates' local connections really the best the party can do? David Grace looks at the conference agenda and fears the worst	
<b>NO TIME FOR TIMIDITY .....</b>	<b>10..11</b>
The NHS is in crisis, water and rail privatisations have failed and Brexit is destroying living standards. It's time for politicians to take the gloves off, says Paul Hindley	
<b>NO PLACE LIKE HOME COUNTIES.....</b>	<b>12..13</b>
Can the Lib Dems be a radical party while focussed on Tory seats in the south of England? Jonathan Calder looks through a pre-manifesto designed to offend nobody	
<b>GIMME SHELTER.....</b>	<b>14..15</b>
Why does the Lib Dem housing policy paper tinker with a broken system rather than call forth a new one, asks Roger Hayes	
<b>ROUND THE HOUSES.....</b>	<b>16..17</b>
Co-housing and custom self-build are both liberal approaches to housing that should have featured more in the Liberal Democrats new policy paper, says Matt Pennell	
<b>PAINTING FOR UKRAINE.....</b>	<b>18..19</b>
Maksym Kravchuk explains how a group of mural painters have tried to keep up Ukrainian morale in the face of Russian attacks	
<b>FRANCE'S CHICKEN IS GETTING PLUCKED.....</b>	<b>20..21</b>
France's errors and arrogance have fuelled jihadists, Russian mercenaries and dictators in Africa, but the west could learn some lessons, says Rebecca Tinsley	
<b>THE GREAT POWERS SHIFT.....</b>	<b>22..23</b>
Unresolved realignments are in progress involving China, India, the USA, Russia and the EU, and the UK must draw close again to the latter or face trouble, says George Cunningham	
<b>"KILL THEIR CHILDREN" .....</b>	<b>24</b>
Ruth Bright reports on the abuse faced by Gypsies and Travellers and some causes for Lib Dem credit	
<b>THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE ULEZ.....</b>	<b>25</b>
Blaise Baquiche says his efforts to campaign on Covid-19 and Partygate in Boris Johnson's old seat were drowned out by a ruthless Tory campaign over vehicle emissions	
<b>THE COUNTRY THAT DOESN'T EXIST .....</b>	<b>26..28</b>
Somaliland is a stable democracy shunned by the world as breakaway state. Keith House says after a recent visit that recognition is overdue	
<b>PITY THE NEXT GOVERNMENT'S INHERITANCE .....</b>	<b>29..31</b>
Addressing the economic crisis requires fleet-of-foot problem-solving efforts, unhindered by turf wars and institutional silos, says Paul Reynolds	
<b>LETTERS.....</b>	<b>32..33</b>
<b>REVIEWS .....</b>	<b>33..36</b>
<i>Lord Benkers</i> .....	<b>37</b>

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# COMMENTARY

## SEPARATE VOTE LINE 542

What is the Lib Dem policy making process for?

It's easy when something has been around for 35 years with little change to assume it is just the natural order of things and even a party that prides itself on radicalism rarely stops to think why it carries out a particular process.

One can safely say the policy process is not there to communicate with voters. It seems barely conceivable that many members of the public will ever look at the voluminous policy motions going to Bournemouth.

The people who draw up the manifesto will look at them a bit, but will be seeking a few things to grab attention - or in some cases avoid embarrassment - not to become entangled in policy thickets.

It's just about possible that the motions and even longer policy papers going to conference will inform any demands the party might make in a hung parliament, though this applied only for a few headline policies in the Coalition era.

Does anyone really need the deep detail in nearly every motion, or could conference spend its time better if it could cover more subjects in less depth, perhaps with more topical motions?

Just look at some of this year's offerings.

'Combatting Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery' is undoubtedly a serious subject worthy of debate but does it need 93 lines (yes you did read that right).

'A Fair Deal for the Armed Forces Community', which affects relatively few people directly, also weighs in at 93 lines but both are minnows compared with 'Bring Back the Industrial Strategy' at 108 lines. This incidentally does not seek to bring back the May-era industrial strategy but to create an entirely new one, and so could have done with a clearer title.

On it goes. Transport gets 102 lines - 17 of them devoted to reiterating the 2019 manifesto - Transforming the Nation's Health manages 104 lines and 'Investing in Our Children's Future' a whopping 126. The pre-manifesto gets 113, 'Food and Farming' 123.

Does anyone, indeed can anyone, really take in this level of detail in a debate and absorb in all? Even if they can, given the rapid changes often seen in political circumstances is it sensible to specify, for example, the exact the level of bus fares, or at what sum the pupil premium should be fixed?

The policy process has its origins in the rows over the Liberal-SDP merger in 1988 when the latter felt the Liberal policy making process was too open to people of whom the leadership might disapprove and needed to be controlled through a two-stage process, which largely survives.

There is nothing necessarily wrong - and much that is right - with what is proposed, but has it become a self-contained process: people propose motions or policy papers, these go to conference in voluminous detail, get rubber-stamped because few have waded through them and are then added to large pile of documents to be quietly forgotten?

## DRAWING TRUMPS

The extraordinary events in the USA seem more like something out of a banana republic or coup-prone polity than a country that likes to see itself as the fount of democracy.

Consider. A former president faces criminal indictments for trying to alter the outcome of an election, inciting a murderous riot, paying hush money to a porn star and keeping secret documents at home in his bathroom.

If this had happened in some obscure dictatorship it might cause vague amusement and then be ignored, but happening as it is in the USA we must contemplate what would happen were Trump to be re-elected next year to the presidency.

The worst predictions about Trump's first term did not come true until right at the end, and apart from some bizarre grandstanding and occasional interventions it is hard to point to much that Trump actually did on the international stage.

This was in part because he had not expected to win and so came to office with no plan, and was restrained to an extent by a group of military officers who acted as 'grown ups' in the White House.

It is possible that America's extreme version of first-past-the-post could restore Trump to the White House given the strange workings of the electoral college.

Republican extremists are thought to be planning in detail how a second term would work and Trump is threatening revenge against those he disapproves of and would no doubt seek to pack the judiciary with his supporters.

Deplorable as those actions would be, they are domestic matters. Internationally, Trump is warm towards Vladimir Putin, hostile to Ukraine, makes noises about leaving (and so effectively abolishing) NATO and is temperamentally isolationist.

So it is at least possible that a UK government in which the Liberal Democrats play some role will find itself dealing with an unpredictable convicted criminal in the White House, who wants to radically change the relationship between the USA and Europe. Anyone planning for that eventuality yet?

# RADICAL BULLETIN

## SHAN'T TELL YOU

Liz Webster's unusual and ill-fated campaign for party president led her to a complaint about the conduct of the election which has been robustly chucked out by the Federal Appeals Panel (FAP).

In its report to conference the FAP said Webster challenged the presidential election campaign result - even though she came a distant third and well behind the invisible campaign of second-placed Lucy Nethsingha.

Webster said she had been defamed on a Facebook group by the campaign of incumbent (and re-elected) president Mark Pack; that it was unfair not to provide her with members' e-mail addresses and to deny her campaign team access to data until a data protection officer had been appointed and trained.

She also said the online voting system was flawed and insecure and had tested this by taking the unusual step of sending her ballot paper link to someone in Sweden. This person was able to vote, which Webster took as a sign of something sinister.

But the FAP noted: "The system was designed to allow anyone to use the unique URL to vote regardless of geographical location, without any further identity check."

There would have been nothing improper in a party member who lived in Sweden voting, and the system could hardly guard against members choosing to send their ballot links to overseas friends.

Webster's conviction that something was wrong with the online ballot led her to consult Martyn Cattermole, who managed her campaign's IT.

He told a presumably bemused FAP that he had spoken to ethical hackers "who had been able to hack into the online voting system".

Cattermole said there were numerous software bugs and vulnerabilities in it which were exploitable for improper use.

What though were these? The FAP said: "However, he said he would not provide detailed evidence in support of these claims because he did not trust us with it. He provided no evidence that anyone had actually interfered with the election process. As such, we could not give any weight to his evidence."

Having dismissed Webster's complaints about the ballot it did likewise over defamation. It was "not satisfied on the balance of probabilities that the allegedly defamatory postings were made at the instigation or with the knowledge or authorisation of the rival campaign team".

As for data protection, It found that the candidates were treated alike and "glitches and 'downtime'" did not disadvantage any particular candidate and in any event none of them were given members' email addresses.

Since Pack won with 4,969 votes, against

Nethsingha's 2,194 and Webster's 1,936 it is indeed hard to see how the result could have been affected (Liberator 415).

## CANCEL CULTURE

Accounts presented to conference give an idea of the cost of cancelling the autumn 2022 event following the death of Queen Elizabeth II. As *Liberator* argued at the time, at least part of the conference could have gone ahead and finished early for the royal funeral.

Instead it was cancelled with all kinds of party members, advertisers, exhibitors and others having to be reimbursed.

Accounts presented to conference show that in 2022 conference expenditure was £228,289 and income £42,450 leaving a whopping gap of £185,389.

By contrast the virtual conferences in 2021 drew income of £170,686 and spending of £170,202, so a tiny profit.

The party has given up completely on publishing membership figures, although as of last year's presidential election it stood at 62,751 (*Liberator* 415). This year's accounts show membership income down from £1,615,350 in 2021 to £1,486,233.

## BARING ITS TEETH

Reforms to the Federal Board mean it is scrutinised by the new Federal Council, a body that can call in and overturn any FB decision subject to it submitting a remonstrance translated into Laotian on an illuminated manuscript when there is a 'Q' in the month. Well almost; call-ins that lead to anything changing have been made difficult.

But there is one in progress on non-disclosure agreements. Oxford West MP Layla Moran has a private member's bill in Parliament to outlaw the use of non-disclosure agreements in certain situations and also wants the party to both cease their use and decline to enforce those reached.

The FB was sympathetic, but these agreements are normally used to end employment disputes or legal proceedings, and it became apparent before the call-in that no-one has the remotest idea how many non-disclosure agreements the party has, or with whom or what disclosures they prevent.

No central record of them has been kept, which was enough for the council to call the matter in for a rethink.

## A WELCOME EXPORT

Despite some notable competition, Danny Alexander was always a clear winner of the 'most over-promoted and embarrassing Lib Dem minister' title during the Coalition.

Every time he appeared on television ineptly justifying the latest Tory cuts, scraping sounds could be heard around the country as Lib Dems pulled out sofas to hide behind. But then Alexander never seemed to grasp that he was being sent out to do George Osborne's dirty work so the latter could both avoid the opprobrium and damage the Lib Dems in one go.

Having lost his Inverness seat in 2015 Alexander departed these shores for a vice-presidency at the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, which is based in Beijing.

MPs and peers on the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament in July issued a report on China's interest in the UK.

This said the committee had earlier "sounded the alarm, in relation to Russia, that oligarchs are now so embedded in society that too many politicians cannot even take a decision on an investment case because they have taken money from those concerned.

"We know that China invests in political influence, and we question whether – with high-profile cases such as David Cameron (UK-China Fund), Sir Danny Alexander (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank), Lord Heseltine (The 48 Group Club) and HMG's former chief information officer, John Suffolk (Huawei) – a similar situation might be arising in relation to China."

What's more, the committee said it was possible that Cameron and Alexander's China-linked roles "were in some part engineered by the Chinese state to lend credibility to Chinese investment, as well as to the broader China brand". Seeing what Alexander did to the Lib Dems, the Chinese may come to regret their investment.

## A PARTY COMMITTED TO TRANSPARENCY

Or not as the case may be. Why were the voting figures in the selection for Lib Dem London mayoral candidate not published when the result was announced?

Given the results of every previous mayoral selection has been published - even on the occasion when the wretched Lembit Öpik came a humiliating fourth (Liberator 349) - the lack of any figures inevitably sparked speculation either that some foul-up had taken place with the count or that something was too embarrassing to declare.

Inevitably, the result leaked out and it showed the embarrassment was the turnout.

Winner Rob Blackie secured 1,185 votes and runner-up Chris French a perfectly creditable 729, while there were 125 votes for 'reopen nominations'.

Those 2,039 votes meant turnout was a mere 18%, one percentage point down on the turnout for the London Assembly list selection, which had been bad enough (Liberator 418).

Returning officer Bob Charlesworth, under mounting pressure, did eventually formally publish the result.

## "THESE ARE MY VALUES, AND I HAD OTHERS"

As a contender for the Tory nomination in the new seat of Farnham & Bordon it was only to be expected that Adam Hanrahan would boast: "I'm an experienced communicator and committed community campaigner with a clear set of Conservative beliefs and values".

These 'Conservative values' were presumably not on display when Hanrahan served as chief of staff to former Lib Dem party president Sal Brinton, nor when he was elected to Sheffield City Council as a Lib Dem.

Hanrahan's website lists among past events: "I get elected in my final year to Sheffield City Council", but did not say for which party, presumably solely for reasons of space.

Among endorsements on his website is one from chancellor Jeremy Hunt, who enthuses: "Adam has made a real difference to how we fight the Liberal Democrats in South West Surrey."

Evidently not enough difference since the local elections in Waverley, which covers a similar area, saw the Tories lose eight seats while the Lib Dems gained five.

Nothing indicates why Hanrahan joined the Tories. Did working for Brinton drive him to it? Informed sources say that although styled 'chief of staff' he was in fact Brinton's only staff member.

## TOILET TRAVELS

Basingstoke and Deane can look forward to sole use of the Mitcham & Morden Commemorative Gold Toilet for the next six months, awarded by Liberator for the worst motion submitted to each conference.

The local party submitted two motions, but sadly that does not entitle it to two toilets. Its first noted how many policies had been

highlighted as priorities in the 2010 and 2015 general elections, and that a hung parliament was possible after the next one and so "conference calls on the Manifesto Group to clearly define our priorities in our manifesto for the forthcoming general election". At that point the motion simply stopped. It must have been ruled out on the grounds that no-one would say the opposite.

Basingstoke & Deane then made some suggestions - inexplicably in an entirely separate motion - as to what these priorities might be.

They came up with six, one of which had five sub-sections so call that 11, which ranged from short statements like 'electoral reform' (though not which system) to free personal care on the Scottish model (unlikely to be widely known elsewhere) to "an emergency programme to insulate all Britain's homes by 2030".

The obvious problem with a motion like this is that it open to an unmanageable flood of amendments as people seek to add or substitute their own pet priorities such that a sensible debate becomes impossible. The toilet thus has a new home.



## CATTY REMARKS

Liking cats and being a Lib Dem quite often go together and so it would seem with Jamie Stone, MP for Caithness and Sutherland, who described the antics of his cat Hattie to a slightly disbelieving Matt Chorley on Times Radio.

Chorley suggested 'cat people' were "dreadful" and "is there something about people who like cats, they are loners a lot of cat people, not a lot of friends, is that basically the Lib Dems?"

Stone replied that Hattie likes to go for walks but only with his wife and noted: "Our pussycat likes women more than men. She likes me, but that might be because I'm an occasional panto dame so maybe she thinks I'm a woman, I'm not sure."

He added that Hattie was "not biddable...she's independent minded, which is how I like to think of Lib Dems".

Good to see the late Ronnie Fearn has a worthy parliamentary successor as dame. Fearn was said to be the only MP ever excused a three-line whip because he was appearing as Mother Goose.

## SHIFTING LOYALTIES

An email to members from London region Lib Dem chair Anne Glaze noted that Professor Kishan Devani had "resigned from the London executive and as a GLA candidate last week. He also resigned his party membership this week, which was not something that seemed on the agenda when we last spoke. He has recently opened a restaurant in America so much of his attention is elsewhere."

Devani's place one from bottom on the Greater London Assembly list meant it was impossible for him gain a seat there, and he appears to continuing his political journeying

He was originally a Tory but left in 2015 over Brexit and joined the Lib Dems. Some people gained the impression he might be a wealthy donor but as of August his name does not appear on the Electoral Commission's list of donors to the party.

Having resigned it looks like the Green Liberal Democrats and the Liberal Democrat Campaign for Race Equality (LDCRE) will both be looking for a new vice president, positions his LinkedIn profile still stated in August that he held despite noting later "Kishan left the Liberal Democrats in 2023".

His tweets in July referred to several meetings with prominent Labour figures, which suggests this might be his next political destination.

Devani's LinkedIn profile starts with the modest words: "Professor Kishan Devani BEM, FRSA is a Public Figure."

The 'professor' title is shown on LinkedIn as referring to honorary appointments at the Tashkent Medical Academy and the Andijan State University, both of which can be found in Uzbekistan.

## TURF WAR

Relations between Lib Dem committees are normally conducted with a certain decorum, which means that when one calls another "unhelpful" it is using a deadly insult.

The report to conference by Claire Hudson, chair of the Federal People Development Committee (FPDC),

objects to an attempted power grab by the Federal Board, after the latter in May discussed the party's future action on diversity.

Hudson wrote: "It was important to me, as chair of FPDC, that we ensured that such an important subject was dealt with through constitutionally agreed structures and I argued, with the backing of FPDC, that setting up a new committee reporting to Federal Board outside the constitutionally agreed sub-committee of FPDC was unhelpful."

It would also no doubt have left a large hole in FPDC's remit. The FB however backed down and an FPDC diversity sub-committee will be led by party vice president Amna Ahmed.

## WHERE ARE THE WELSH?

Federal Appeals Panel (FAP) chair David Graham has an evident problem with the Welsh, because he has none of them. His report to conference noted the panel still had vacancies, three of which must be filled by the Welsh party.

These vacancies have prevented the FAP dealing with any Welsh cases, because the constitution requires that any dispute between state parties, or between them and the federal party, must be heard by a panel including a member appointed from each of the states concerned.

In other cases at least one hearing panel member must have been appointed by the state party of which the applicant is a member.

"Welsh cases can currently not be heard until the Welsh vacancies are filled," Graham complained. "This state of affairs has persisted for a year, and ought not to be acceptable for Welsh Party members." He pointed out that Welsh appointees need not be Welsh members.

## SUTTON WHO?

Although the Federal Appeals Panel has still not published its ruling in the case pursued by former Sutton & Cheam PPC David Campanale it would seem he has indeed gone.

Local members took umbrage when his prominent former position in the socially conservative and rather weird Christian People's Alliance became widely known and he was eventually removed. Sutton's website has expunged all mention of him.

## MICHAEL STEED

Liberator regrets to record the death of Michael Steed in early September, aged 83. He was noted for his work as a psephologist with an eerie ability to predict election results, as a stalwart party campaigner and candidate, an originator of the Glee Club and for his spell as president of the Liberal party in 1978-79. Michael was a friend of Liberator and an occasional contributor. A full obituary will appear in the next issue.

# IT EVEN HAPPENS HERE

## Serious poverty can be found even in the outwardly affluent Chesham and Amersham constituency. Sarah Green reports

A volunteer who regularly makes the trip from London to help us canvass in Chesham and Amersham recently observed “not everyone around here is affluent, are they?”.

He wasn't being flippant, and he wasn't judging, he was speaking a truth that is far too often overlooked.

In Chesham and Amersham, we are blessed with beautiful villages and vistas. Many in our community have done well in life and it is wonderful to see the generosity of so many as they donate to our local causes and get stuck into community activities that help everyone.

But there is a misconception that everyone living and growing-up in the Home Counties simply must be affluent. It stands to reason, no?

With its pretty villages, big houses and rock star residents it does appear to be a place reserved for the wealthy. The truth is that you don't have to look very far to find people who are struggling, and the observation this volunteer made was after months of joining our canvass sessions and encountering people who are living day-to-day and unable to see past that because they do not have the economic means to do so.

Ever since getting elected, many of the conversations on the doorstep, much of the casework coming into my inbox and a great deal of feedback from local charities has suggested a level of deprivation hiding in plain sight.

This evidence led me to try to find out more and in the spring of last year we created a cost-of-living survey to dig deeper into this issue. Simply wishing the problem away or pretending it's non-existent - as some appear to do - will not resolve the heart of the problem, it is vital to engage.

The results of our survey presented heart-breaking testimony from parents going without food in order to ensure they were able to feed their children; small businesses worried about whether they could continue trading and employing local people; and pensioners were cashing in their savings so that they could afford the bills to heat their homes.

I should point out that much of this evidence was given to us before we hit the winter months when, for far too many, staying warm has often meant not eating at all.

In bald terms, I would say that there is a great deal of wealth sitting alongside a lot of need across our community. To give an example, Chesham and Amersham is home to the least deprived local government ward in England, the beautiful area of Great Missenden and Prestwood. But this community

still requires its own foodbank, and a local primary school has been distributing meal packs to a number of families since 2016.

This summer, I visited projects across the constituency that are in place to tackle holiday hunger amongst our community's children. At one lunch club a parent confided that her greatest worry was her electricity bill, she was therefore looking at any and all ways to cut down on the amount of electricity her young family was using while beginning to consider with dread the winter months ahead.

This mum was on a prepayment meter and it acts as a constant source of stress for her.

The shameful practice of forcing those who can least afford it, onto prepayment meters that charge more per megawatt hour than a standard meter is simply outrageous. The fact that companies don't even need to send in the heavies if you have opted for a smart meter and just change it over remotely is also a breach of trust between provider and customer. It is one of the many reasons I called on Rishi Sunak in a prime minister's questions session in the new year to scrap pre-payment meters altogether.

Aside from concerns about the ability of families and pensioners to heat their homes in winter, the consistent feedback from local

foodbanks, community fridges, community takeaways and other similar projects is that demand and calls on these services is still increasing.

Last summer at another local charity that focusses on helping families, Restore Hope Latimer, I had a series of conversations with parents about school uniforms and their affordability. When I asked the charity whether they were having the same conversations this summer they replied, “No, Sarah. They are in survival mode. That's next month's problem, they need to get to the end of this week first”.

Part of my role is to champion the best of our area and what it has to offer. It is also to acknowledge and give voice to the very real challenges facing members of our community.

And for some of those brought up locally the challenges they face would sound all too familiar in areas this government says they want to level-up.



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Sarah Green is Liberal Democrat MP for Chesham and Amersham and a member of the Liberator Collective

# ONLY LOCAL HEROES

## Is stressing a candidates' local connections really the best the party can do? David Grace looks at the conference agenda and fears the worst

Back in the 1980s various Liberal groups would hold meetings about the direction of the party. "Where are we now" was a popular title.

Today's answer is superficially encouraging but deeply depressing. Yes, we have won four parliamentary by-elections in previously Tory areas, but why? Why, when our poll rating remains stuck around 10%? After two days distributing leaflets in Somerton & Frome, I thought I should look at them to see what we were saying.

You could summarise it as 1) The Tories are dreadful, 2) Sarah Dyke is wonderful and 3) Sarah Dyke is LOCAL. The word 'local' wasn't actually in capitals but it didn't need them as it occurred in every paragraph and the headings.

Does that answer the question "what do the Liberal Democrats stand for?" In a way, I suppose, but it's hardly a feast of ideas or a vision or a clarion call for liberalism. Now I know all the apparatchiks and campaigners are going to tell me, "That's what works. Look, we won."

Did I expect a succinct summary of JS Mill's On Liberty? No, I didn't but I don't see a long-term strategy in saying: "We're not the Tories, we're nice and we're LOCAL". It's symptomatic of the deterioration of British politics from alternative views of society to the managerial "we'll run things better than the others".

### DEFENDING LIES

So what is the offering of the other main parties? The Tories are trapped into defending the lies that brought them into power. One is very old and dates back at least to Margaret Thatcher: you can have good public services and low taxes. False – you have to choose, unless you espouse Lis Truss' economics. Then you can achieve, as the Tories have, the remarkable combination of high taxes and failing public services.

The other lie is of course that the UK is better off out of the European Union. Nobody believes that one, not even I suspect the Tory ministers frantically searching for Brexit unicorns. Labour has bought into both lies whether it believes them or not. Starmer with his 18% lead over the Tories has embraced what Alistair Campbell calls the Ming Vase Strategy - never say anything which would upset anyone, for which the Tories could attack you or which might lose a right-wing working class vote.

Thus Labour promises to make Brexit work and not to put up taxes. It's a mystery to me how they can hope to make any significant change at all. To cap it all, I heard Stephen Kinnock the other day criticising the Tories for not controlling immigration and promising Labour would reduce immigration.

Liberals always like to believe we are different. We really offer a change to these two conservative behemoths. I have shared this optimism although the 2010-15 coalition rather dimmed that hope.

But take a look at this autumn's party conference agenda. Of the 17 policy motions, I won't be surprised if 14 are passed unanimously (if there weren't someone amending line 48 to insert a reference to their favourite nostrum which got left out). Most people in all parties and none would agree to the motions on human trafficking, the armed forces, standards in public life, investing in children, restoring community policing, ending food poverty and standing with Ukraine.

There is definite room for improving the housing motion and sharpening the pre-manifesto. I don't say that it is automatically wrong to say things that most people agree with. Perhaps it's good electoral politics. Of course, until someone works out how we would pay for it all, it's just flim-flam, well-meaning and popular but not likely to happen.

More substantially I find nowhere, other than the pre-manifesto, where proposers have attempted to ground the text in liberalism. What is the underlying ideology which links all these motions together? Twelve of them come straight from parliamentarians. Where is the ferment of ideas that used to come from the membership? Does it still exist or is it just censored from the agenda by the Federal Conference Committee (FCC), anxious to avoid any appearance of disagreement in the ranks?

Don't expect a dazzling display of rhetoric from the speeches either. In their wisdom FCC has reduced the standard speech time to three minutes. Even the BBC's Today programme lets people have more than that. These will not be debates, just an exchange of sound bites.

### SYMPTOMS OF XENOPHOBIA

Is this shadowy world of electorally successful expedients all that democracy is now capable of? Are politicians just reduced to saying popular things and not to leading public opinion at all? There are sadly two examples where the constant drip-drop of messages from the right did change how the public see things and they are both symptoms of xenophobia, that disease which always spreads when the economy hits bad times.

The first is immigration and the second the European Union. On both issues the failure was from the so-called progressive wing of Labour and Liberals who spent decades not speaking up and instead letting Farage and his friends sell their lies.

Talking of lies, what is the Liberal response to the two big ones I mentioned? Are we alerting the public



to the damage of Brexit? Are we calling for the UK to rejoin the Single Market? Well, it's a long-term aspiration but we don't like to talk about it, not out loud anyway. Thus it's in the pre-manifesto report which the journalists won't read but it's not in the motion which they might.

What about taxes? Perhaps I have overlooked something but the conference agenda does not appear to address the party's views on management of the economy, surely a key element in our stance. Apparently we call for a fair, prosperous and innovative economy and we're going to end deep poverty within a decade. Somewhere I have missed the bit where we say how.

Perhaps I expect too much. After all, the Tories don't appear to believe in anything and Labour is terrified of anyone thinking they're socialists. Why should I expect our leaders to talk about Liberalism? Why would the voters want to hear that? British politics has reduced itself to a contest of managers. People neither hold power nor expect empowerment. For most people the only realistic expectation is to have a better boss.

Hence our mind-boggling empty slogan For a Fair Deal which has replaced its equally vacuous predecessor that did so well in 2019, Demand Better. Both might work well for a supermarket, although clearly we don't mind offending the people who already have the best of everything and wouldn't welcome a fair deal. The Tories have that vote sown up.

Both slogans say to the voters that they are supplicants, patients to whom and for whom things are

done. They deny citizens their own power to change things, which lies at the heart of liberalism. The problem of selling liberalism is that building a fair, free and open society comes with a duty, a duty to be an active citizen and, let's be honest for once, most people don't want to be. They are so used to others taking the decisions for them. They have been denied power for so long they have no realistic expectation of ever having it. Our job has ever been to show people how together they can take power and use it, not just a fair deal.

Thus I will always prefer the 1974 poster and slogan: Take Power : Vote Liberal.

---

David Grace is a member of the Liberator Collective

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# NO TIME FOR TIMIDITY

The NHS is in crisis, water and rail privatisations have failed and Brexit is destroying living standards. It's time for politicians to take the gloves off, says Paul Hindley

Fellow radical liberals, we are gathered again on the eve of another party conference season. It is highly likely that in 12 months time we will be on the verge of a general election. Assuming that the opinion polls do not change in that time, there is every chance that this long terrible Tory night will come to an end. This will hopefully be accompanied by a cluster of new Liberal Democrat MPs who would be essential in ensuring a Conservative defeat.

Yet do not expect the spirit of optimism that accompanied Tony Blair's landslide victory in 1997. I for one am increasingly apprehensive about the prospect of a future Labour government led by Sir Keir Starmer. While Starmer would represent an improvement on the current Tory incumbents, his creeping authoritarianism, cultural conservatism and crippling policy caution is increasingly alarming.

## HATRED AND INTOLERANCE

From the NHS to Brexit to privatisation, the lack of honesty and courage from politicians across the spectrum is breathtaking. I have never known a time when the major politicians of the day are too scared to even recognise the problems at hand, let alone determine meaningful ways to address them. This should alarm liberals most of all, because social injustices inevitably breed hatred and intolerance.

Our NHS is in crisis. In fact, more than this, it is beginning to fall apart at the seams. NHS dentistry is essentially being privatised. Thousands of NHS dental patients across the country (including myself) have had to pay to go to a private dental practice for the first time in their lives. A crippling lack of forward planning, the lack of enough trained NHS dentists and a lack of public funding for NHS dentistry are at the heart of this crisis. And that is before we mention historically low morale amongst NHS staff, the need for industrial action, record waiting lists and record waiting times to get an ambulance.

What is Labour's response to the NHS crisis? Yet more top-down reorganisations and what amounts to yet more Blairite public-private partnerships. The Liberal Democrat approach to health policy has been much better. The party is committed to a 'GP Guarantee' and a comprehensive action plan to address the crisis in NHS dentistry. At our Spring Conference earlier in the year, the party recommitted itself to the Charles Kennedy-era policy of free personal care for the elderly in England.

Politicians of all stripes need to be honest with the general public about the state of the NHS. There is no amount of reforms that will save our public health service, it needs more money and fast. A large NHS spending deficit has emerged since 2010. This must be

closed. That therefore means that more public money must be raised. Since more borrowing is not currently politically palatable and austerity has already left many other departmental budgets threadbare, the only choice is to raise general taxation.

It is safe to say that calling for tax rises is hardly a big vote winner. But if we are to have a viable NHS then taxes will have to increase. In the 1990s, the Liberal Democrats ran on a popular policy of a penny for education. Today, the party should consider adopting a similar policy of a penny for the NHS; a 1% increase across all income tax brackets with the proceeds of the tax rise going directly to fund the NHS.

If we are to repair our welfare state, we need to radically overhaul our approach to economic policy. How can it be right that banks, corporate chief executives and big oil and gas companies are making record profits at a time when millions of people across the country are struggling to keep a roof over their heads and keep food on the table?

Britain has immense wealth reserves. These must be adequately taxed. This includes the unearned income gained through land ownership, property ownership and asset ownership. We should also increase taxes on the record profits of big business during a cost of living crisis. This 'greedflation' has to end.

We must reject the right-wing Thatcherite mantra that "there is no money" or that progressive policies require "a magic money tree". If the public exchequer does not have enough money to fund vital policies needed to repair our social safety net, then that is because politicians are not willing to collect the additional revenue through taxation. All of this is at a time when the Conservative Party is actively considering abolishing inheritance tax, one of the few taxes on unearned wealth and privilege. Britain is one of the richest nations on Earth. Yet we have more than one million people who need to use a food bank, an NHS in terminal decline and schools where teachers have to buy their own stationery because their school budgets cannot stretch to that.

Beveridge's welfare state is in great peril and poverty and social hardship are only growing as a result. This is not because there is not enough money to fund an adequate welfare system in the 21st century. This is not because it has not been sufficiently 'reformed' to meet modern needs. This is because Conservative politicians, who have internalised the ideology of Thatcherite retrenchment, have been unwilling to find additional revenue to fund it. This is socially negligent at best, and at worst, a conscious attempt to dismantle the welfare state. In the end, it does not matter which it is, the result is still the same. The rich continue to hold great masses of asset-based

wealth and unearned income, while the very poorest face the very real prospect of starvation and homelessness. The rich stay rich and the poor get even poorer. It was forever thus in Tory Britain.

Another vital policy area, where politicians across all parties lack honesty and courage is on the issue of Brexit.

A study by the London School of Economics has demonstrated that up to a third of food inflation is the result of Brexit. Britain continues to have stubbornly high food inflation in comparison to similar developed world economies. Brexit is a central reason for this. The decision to leave the European Single Market in particular, has both hindered small businesses and contributed to the cost of living crisis.

The need to rejoin the Single Market is overwhelming. Yet no major politician has the courage to mention that the decision to leave the Single Market is a feature in both inflation and worsening living standards. This comes at a time when public dissatisfaction with Brexit is only growing. Several recent polls have recorded that the majority of the public now favour rejoining the EU, not just the Single Market. Yet Britain's political class is silent on the issue. All the while, the living standards of people across the country continue to diminish, one of the major causes of which are the trade restrictions that have accompanied Brexit.

A final policy area where contemporary politicians lack courage is privatisation. The privatisations of rail and water have failed. Even the Tories have been forced to take swathes of the railway network back into public ownership, as various private rail companies have either gone bust or have been unable to deliver a sufficient service for passengers.

As for the water industry (which only remains privatised in England), sewage is regularly flooding into rivers and onto coastlines. This while English water executives are making record profits and are expecting customers to pay an additional £10bn in repairs to the water network. While during the same period, they expect to pay their own shareholders £15bn in dividends.

Privatisation has led to wealthy executives, shareholders and the sovereign wealth funds of authoritarian regimes (such as those of China and Saudi Arabia) being able to profit from England's natural water wealth, while raw sewage floods into our rivers and coasts.

## VAMPIRIC EFFECT

In practice, the privatisation of a natural monopoly (such as water and the railways) does not lead to greater efficiency or greater value for money for customers. Instead, it leads to a vampiric effect, whereby the natural wealth that should be being used to benefit society and to improve the service, is instead being leached away. This leads to worse and worse service outcomes for customers.

This is no time for political timidity. This is a time for political radicalism. Britain once again needs a Beveridge-style moment to usher in a new progressive

*“There is no amount of reforms that will save our public health service, it needs more money and fast”*

consensus and to banish the ghosts of Thatcherism once and for all. And yet, Starmer's Labour appears to be devoid of such radicalism. Labour are paralysed by fear of the Tories.

It therefore falls to us radical liberals to support the big ideas needed to forge this new consensus. We need to be taxing assets in land

and property more. In addition, we need to be enacting more windfall taxes when the banks, the big oil and gas companies or the big supermarkets are making record profits during a cost of living crisis. Beyond this, we must unequivocally make the case for Britain to re-join the European Single Market. If liberals cannot make the case for internationalism, then who can?

But radical liberals need to do more than just repairing the pre-existing welfare state and challenging Brexit, we also need to give everyone a right to capital ownership. The need for a Guaranteed Basic Income (GBI) has never been greater. Liberal Democrats must be tireless in our efforts to introduce a GBI and with it the means to abolish deep poverty within a decade. This policy would ensure that everyone, especially the very poorest, would have some kind of income.

Finally, we must mutualise all the water companies in England. Mutualisation would see the water companies become member-owned mutuals (similar to building societies, for example). Profits would not be diverted into lavish shareholder dividends. Instead, profits would be reinvested into lowering the bills of customers and into maintaining the water system. In addition, water users would elect member representatives to represent their interests on the company board and to hold the management to account. Mutualisation is the democratic radical liberal alternative to state socialist nationalisation and Tory privatisation.

Britain needs a progressive alternative to the status quo. The recent conference of National Conservatives showed the quasi-fascist direction the Tory right are heading in. That may be the future of British politics, if progressives fail to deliver social justice. What is Britain's future to be? Radical liberal hope, liberty and social justice or hatred, authoritarianism and injustice?

In 1942, in The Beveridge Report, William Beveridge wrote that a “revolutionary moment in the world's history is a time for revolutions, not for patching”. Progressives need to be heeding his words today. This is no time for timid patching. This is the time for a policy revolution!

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Paul Hindley is a PhD researcher at Lancaster University and a member of the Blackpool Liberal Democrats. He previously served on the Social Liberal Forum council

# NO PLACE LIKE HOME COUNTIES

## Can the Lib Dems be a radical party while focussed on Tory seats in the south of England? Jonathan Calder looks through a pre-manifesto designed to offend nobody

“We want to use the by-election playbook across the Blue Wall,’ says one Lib Dem insider, encouraged by the party’s victories in Chesham, North Shropshire, Tiverton and Somerton.”

I don’t know how many ‘Lib Dem insiders’ there are, but they seem to spend most of their time in conversation with journalists. This one was talking to James Heale, who wrote about our plans for the general election in the *Spectator*:

“The Lib Dems’ focus has been on early selections of respected community figures, raising their profile and finding a local twist on national issues: the NHS, cost of living and sewage. They are targeting the 34 seats in the south-east where they finished second to the Conservatives in 2019. Seats with a Tory majority of 2,000 or less were asked to find a candidate at the earliest opportunity to enable ‘an 18-month by-election’. There have been savvy selections in places such as Wimbledon and Winchester, where the local vet was chosen. New seats offer new opportunities too. In the freshly created constituency of Harpenden and Berkhamsted, the Lib Dem candidate has been bombarded by invitations to events by constituents who mistakenly believe she is the sitting MP.”

And when you are fighting a by-election what you want in the policy field is a few appealing bullet points for your leaflets and nothing that will upset the voters you are targeting if they happen to find out about it. It’s best to keep this background in mind when reading *For a Fair Deal*, the overall policy paper being presented to the autumn conference of the Liberal Democrats in Bournemouth.

Turn to the early chapters on the economy and on business and jobs, and you will find commitments to invest in infrastructure, innovation and skills. It also promises a ‘proper, one-off windfall tax on the super-profits of oil and gas producers and traders’ and action on the various loopholes that allow the very wealthy to pay tax at a lower rate than the rest of us.

### PERKS OF THE RICH

All this is good in that it recognises that it is not wicked for governments to tax and spend – and the need for more capital spending on school and hospitals has become more apparent even since *For a Fair Deal* was published. In taking aim at the perks of the rich, it chooses the right target and one that will chime with the widespread anger at the approach of the current government, but you will search in vain for mention of a wealth tax or an attempt to square the circle of advocating economic growth at a time of environmental pressures.

You will find a mention of Europe in these chapters

in a pledge to:

“Unlock British businesses’ global potential by bringing down trade barriers and building stronger future relationships with our closest trading partners, including by starting to fix the Conservatives’ botched deal with Europe following the four-step roadmap as set out in chapter 21.”

This is a little like *Private Eye*’s ‘continued on page 94’ as chapter 21 or ‘International’ is *For a Fair Deal*’s final chapter and the one where you feel a commitment to give children an hour’s teaching a week in Esperanto would be hidden if conference voted it through. Yet it’s where we find what should be at the heart of those early chapters:

“We are determined to repair the damage that the Conservatives’ deal with Europe has done to the economy, especially farmers, fishers and small businesses. ... Finally, once the ties of trust have been restored, we would aim to place the UK-EU relationship on a more formal and stable footing by seeking to join the Single Market.”

Because there is no sensible policy on economic growth that does not involve lifting the sanctions we imposed on ourselves by leaving the Single Market, and that is true whatever position you took on Brexit. This is why Labour should be talking about rejoining it and why even intelligent Leavers – those who really do want to ‘make Brexit work’ – should support this policy too. (The unintelligent Leavers want Brexit to fail so they can announce that have been betrayed and wallow in self-pity.)

Interviewed on Alastair Campbell and Rory Stewart’s second podcast at the start of September, Ed Davey declined to say that the Liberal Democrats wanted to see Britain back in the European Union. He was happy to talk about our instinctive internationalism, but that was as far as he would go. He dwelt on the need to develop a language that would take people with us, which is something, it is true, the official Remain campaign spectacularly failed to do in the EU referendum campaign. Above all, he did not want to return to the divisive politics of those days.

Yet it’s hard to see how an issue like Brexit can ever stop being divisive. The 1975 referendum on whether Britain should remain a member of the European Economic Community was won by more than two votes to one, but it did not reconcile the losers to Britain’s increasing involvement with European institutions. No one would argue that the 2016 referendum campaign was good for British politics – Labour activists going to by-elections now have to be told not to insult any Conservative voters they came across – but the case

for rejoining the Single Market has to be made and the debate has to be won. As sensible Conservatives has learnt to their cost, if you try to buy off the Brexit ultras they simply bank your concessions and come back for more.

This determination to avoid being ‘divisive’ may well have one eye on the general good of British politics, but the other is firmly on those 34 seats in the South East of England. Because I’ve heard that word “divisive” somewhere else recently – when Munira Wilson, the party’s education spokesperson, talked to the education magazine Schools Week:

These days, Wilson ... is sceptical that grammar schools help with social mobility, believing entry is “a case of who can afford to coach their children to go”.

While it would be “divisive” to close existing grammar schools, she “wouldn’t necessarily” create new ones.

## EVADING THE LEOPARD

I will admit to nostalgia for the days when the products of council grammar schools outshone academically the products of expensive private schools, but that was in an era when those private schools had not yet noticed there was no longer an empire to man and so continued to prize an ability to evade the school leopard above book learning. Once they caught up with the modern world – and it took only two or three decades – money began to tell and we soon learnt that what was really divisive was selection at 11 and the private/public divide.

Wilson did talk about making private schools work harder to justify their charitable status, but none of that has made its way into For a Fair Deal. So instead let me quote the former Conservative education minister George Walden on why that divide damages us all:

“In no other European country do the moneyed and professional classes - lawyers, surgeons, businessmen, accountants, diplomats, newspaper and TV editors, judges, directors, archbishops, air chief marshals, senior academics, Tory ministers, artists, authors, top civil servants – in addition to the statistically insignificant but eye-catching cohort of aristocracy and royalty – reject the system of education used by the overwhelming majority pretty well out of hand, as an inferior product.

“In no modern democracy except Britain is tribalism in education so entrenched that the two main political parties send their children to different schools.”

There are some sensible reforms suggested in this chapter, though no sign of our previous view that schools were too dominated by testing and Ofsted inspections. You can see why Schools Week got the impression that we have rather lost interest in education.

Reflecting Davey’s interests, the chapters on climate change and energy, and those on health and care, are among the most convincing. Climate change is “the biggest threat to human existence” and we “urgently need to limit temperature rises to 1.5°C or we will

*“It’s hard to see how an issue like Brexit can ever stop being divisive”*

face irreversible change” – no worries about being divisive there. And these statements are accompanied by a series of strong policies, including:

Cut greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2045.

Invest significantly in renewable power so that 80% of the UK’s electricity is

generated from renewables by 2030.

Provide free retrofits for low-income homes and generous tax incentives for other households to reduce energy consumption, emissions, fuel bills and reliance on gas, and help to end fuel poverty

Plant at least 60 million trees a year to help reach net zero and restore woodland habitats, and increase the use of sustainable wood in construction.

The chapter on care emphasises the importance of social care and the crisis in which it currently finds itself. Strikingly, it calls for free personal care to be introduced, ‘based on the model introduced by the Liberal Democrats in government in Scotland in 2002’. In the health chapter, we call for patients to have the right to see their GP within seven days or within 24 hours if it is urgent and recognise that to make this a reality we will have to recruit and train more doctors. The seven-day wait would not so long ago have been seen as unacceptable, but this is where this Conservative government has left us.

It doesn’t do to be churlish. If the policies laid out in For A Fair Deal were enacted, Britain would be a better place, but reading it has left me with two unanswered questions. Are the Liberal Democrats in any sense a radical party? And if they are, is it possible to build such a party on the votes of comfortably off residents of the Home Counties?

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Jonathan Calder is a member of the Liberator Collective

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# GIMME SHELTER

## Why does the Lib Dem housing policy paper tinker with a broken system rather than call forth a new one, asks Roger Hayes

Why is it governments, whether national or local, struggle to do the joined-up thinking? As with just about everything else in the world, housing suffers from being treated in isolation. There are (at least) five closely related topic areas, all of which Liberals must tackle and overcome together in a concerted and coordinated way. Only then might we stand a chance coming even close to developing a meaningful housing policy that could meet and sustain the nation's needs.

The party will debate housing at the Bournemouth conference. The motion has much that is good and worthy of support, but it also falls short in a number of important areas which must also be addressed if greater Liberalism is to be injected into our approach rather than just an attempt at efficiency.

### VOTE PINK, GET PALE BLUE

This dreadful Tory government grows more awful by the day, yet I wonder how much better a Labour alternative might be. In his timid attempts not to offend anyone, Starmer has not just become Labour lite, but Tory lite too – vote pink, get pale blue. Labour offers little more than acceptable Conservatism. Liberals must not fall into the same trap.

If our society is to build sufficient homes to meet the needs of its growing, ageing and diverging population then a number of obstacles will need to be addressed and overcome in coordinated union.

Liberals must combine everything from devolved and involved planning, through regulated and reliable land supply and sustainable community development, that can create energy efficient, net zero homes, built to high modern standards, while seriously tackling the retrofitting of the existing housing stock.

Housing targets, however set, are never a measure of success. The need for a stick to beat local government with is a 'bricks-without-straw' punishment to deflect the blame for failure rather than fixing a badly broken system.

What is required is devolved powers with realistic funding and regulation that can enable our diverse communities meet their needs. We must end the battle between local, national and regional government. It frustrates and alienates communities leaving people feeling angry and done-to. It fuels 'nimbyism' and dysfunctional behaviour from developers, national government, local authorities and community groups alike.

Even if we do build enough homes, of the right type and size, where they are needed, with the guidance and blessing of local people, we then need to ensure they are offered on a mix of imaginative and flexible tenures at prices people can actually afford to pay.

The current national planning policy gives a nod

to community engagement, but in practice cuts people out. Communities are presented with a fait accompli which breeds resentment and negative 'nimby' attitudes. There are too many in the Liberal Democrats (and some of those have been elected) who see being against things as an electoral opportunity and then continue that anti-mindset when they end up running their local council.

It can often be the case that collective and genuine opposition to a planning application will bring a community together, but it is my long experience that community cohesion will only be sustained by finding common cause and being a favour of something better together.

If we want to build a Liberal society rather than simply being an opportunist insurgency we must stand for things and speak up in favour of taking Liberal action. What better way to help create that Liberal society than by using our power in local government to demonstrate one of the first principles of just such a society, through enabling communities to take and use power, and encouraging them to do so effectively.

We have shown in my area of Kingston that, although forced to work within a broken system, meaningful engagement and working with local people rather than fighting against them and attempting to deflect the blame on central government and the Mayor of London, we can herald a new approach to planning.

Through innovative (and in our case award winning) techniques like our Citizens Panel, devolution to neighbourhoods and community working groups, our current local plan has seen one of the largest and most positive responses to community engagement and consultation. We had thousands of detailed responses, with contributions from local schools and community groups, and 250 university students involved.

We must encourage this positive approach at a national level not simply resorting to local populism.

### INVESTIGATE HOUSEBUILDERS

Liberals should be calling for the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) to launch a full-blown investigation into the housebuilding sector. It is high time this cynical blockage in the housing supply pipeline was ended. It is one of the biggest stumbling blocks to a steady and reliable flow of sustainable housing across the country.

The party needs to be bold and advocate community led cooperatives that can take control of land if greed and indifference by distant developers sees them preferring to wait until the price is right rather than reliably providing an essential service for the nation.

The CMA is only the start, however. It may help shine a light on the problem, but radical legislation is

needed to wrestle control of land away from a handful of powerful and obscenely wealthy companies and handing it back to locally run trust, boards and councils.

Liberal policy cannot be about ticking boxes. It must be about meeting true need and building and sustaining communities, which of course links back to the planning together point. Hopefully we will see a resurgence and a

substantial number of Lib Dem MP elected next year, but if we are to undo the catastrophic failures of the last 13 years of Tory misrule, we will need to hold Labour's feet to the fire and demand the actions necessary to effect lasting change.

The motion before Conference calls for "a new approach to housing targets, with robust, independently-assessed local housing targets that are appropriate for the specific areas' needs, and Introducing binding targets for affordable and social housing" but this is about finding workarounds for a broken system rather than replacing it with a Liberal alternative.

The motion does get more adventurous in the second half of its proposals and this more radical approach should be encouraged throughout.

Regardless of how many new houses are built, there will remain a massive national imperative to maintain and retrofit the existing housing stock. We have talked for decades about proper insulation and energy efficiency and, now strides have been made in smart metering and renewable energy generation, we must ensure that local energy generation and smart grids can be rapidly expanded to benefit the tens of millions of people who live in the houses that already exist.

*"There are too many in the Liberal Democrats (and some of those have been elected) who see being against things as an electoral opportunity"*

In Kingston we are investing in locally owned district heating networks (poo-to-power) and energy companies and using our community networks to encourage local cooperation with things like the installation of PV panels and street batteries.

So, if we continue with the joined up thinking we will need to come up with new ideas for flexible, transferable and convertible tenures and reliable, affordable and

mutual ways of funding the building and ownership or renting of our homes in the future.

This may be a subject for another day in more detail, but we all live in many homes throughout our lives and it should not be beyond our wit to reinvent what have been for some time outmoded ways of funding and affording one of the most basic of human needs. Why not a trusted, transferable, flexibly-affordable financing deal for life ...

We sing The Land as part of a rich Liberal heritage, let us make those principles real again in a modern world where people no longer have to battle Tory landowners for the right home to be built in their communities, or are forced to go cap-in-hand to Rachmanesque landlords (some of them local councils) for decent and affordable accommodation. There is a better and more Liberal way, let's encourage the Lib Dems to fully take it.

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Roger Hayes is a Liberal Democrat councillor in Kingston-upon-Thames

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# ROUND THE HOUSES

## Co-housing and custom self-build are both liberal approaches to housing that should have featured more in the Liberal Democrats new policy paper, says Matt Pennell

The Lib Dems have released a policy paper which is the most detailed statement we've made about housing in a generation.

The paper Tackling the Housing Crisis [<https://www.libdems.org.uk/conference/papers/autumn-2023/policy-paper-tackling-the-housing-crisis>] is not perfect, but there is much to like about it and I hope it gets approved at party conference. I'd like to take you through a singularly liberal vision for housing:

Between 1919 and 1979 Britain built seven million council houses. As we all know, the size of the council house sector has declined sharply since then, and there are currently only four million social houses - councils and housing associations.

The sector continues to contract via Right to Buy and demolition. Britain builds on average 170,000 homes a year, and demolishes 50,000. Council and ex-council homes are vastly overrepresented in what we knock down. This means we'd have to build around 40,000 council homes a year just to stay still.

Liberal Democrats have had a policy of building 150,000 'social' homes a year for some time now. Definitions of social housing have become a little slippery, the Government says we build 60,000 'affordable' homes a year.

This includes homes rented out at 80% market rate, in practice this means the average monthly private rent is £1,200, so 'affordable' rents are £960 a month.

### PANTOMIME DEFINITIONS

The average council house rent is actually under £500. I'm happy to report that the party recognises the pantomime surrounding definitions of affordability and is placing an emphasis on rekindling council housing as this is the only genuinely affordable option.

Perhaps the biggest oversight in the new policy paper is a lack of emphasis on social housing repairs.

In the past 18 months ITV has reported on a number of horror cases in both council homes and housing association properties, it's a national scandal. Improving council

housing conditions is relatively straightforward compared with ramping up production of new homes; you don't need to jump through hoops in the planning system, you just need to improve budgets and the monitoring/reporting process.

The regulatory landscape has been rigged against councils building new homes - Right to Buy receipts can't be mixed in with Section 106 money, for example. Only this March was Right to Buy proceeds finally ring fenced properly for councils. At the time the Chartered Institute for Housing observed, "The UK Housing Review shows that receipts total over £40bn since Right to Buy began in 1981, only a small proportion of which have been spent on new homes. The review also shows that there has been a net loss of 218,000 social rented homes over the last decade, during which 157,000 have been sold via Right to Buy."

Council housing is a Liberal cause: You don't need me to tell you Lloyd-George built homes for heroes after passing the Addison Act, but our roots go deeper - back to works such as 'The Condition of England' by Charles Masterman that place an emphasis on social progress and improving housing conditions for the masses





Custom Self Build (CSB) is a distinctly niche housing sector in Britain that is mainstream across continental Europe. There is no lack of interest in it here, property makeover shows and the ultimate self build show Grand Designs get high ratings.

CSB has remained only a nice idea despite the interest, as it's difficult to buy a plot of land, get planning permission and put a works team together. CSB remains the preserve of landowners or people already in the construction industry so the number of new self-build homes bumps along at around 10-15,000 a year. Really half-hearted measures have been brought in to boost self-build, you can register with your local council if you have an interest.

Beyond that probably nothing will happen, the council won't direct you to a plot of land or put you in touch with a builder. The sector will continue to be on the periphery of housebuilding, which is dominated by the biggest developers and contractors, until there is proper intervention. I propose boosting CSB by allowing councils and development corporations to be enablers - buying up land and allocating CSB plots as part of wider schemes. This recently happened in York when run by a Lib Dem/Green coalition. I'd love to see it rolled out across the rest of the country. Like council housing, CSB is something the government can control as a key enabler. I propose more intervention and a target of 25,000 CSB homes a year

Some might dismiss CSB as a middle class indulgence but self-build equals self-expression. Many people have a singular vision for the kind of house they want to live in, why not let more people realise their dreams? It would certainly lead to a less boring, less generic housing landscape with more individuality

Here in Kent I live in an early version of co-housing - this involves all public realm space being administered by residents' societies and in my case a village association too.

It's different from a normal landlord-tenant association relationship as householders own and manage their neighbourhoods. I own my house, back garden and garage, everything else - front garden, landscaping, paths, roads, garage courts, car parks is owned by a residents' society that I am a member of.

Across the country there are lots of apartment blocks where residents pay a service charge to a managing agent. With co-housing fees are paid for gardening, tree surgery, path repairs etc but they are a lot lower because administration is carried out by volunteers and residents get to set the fees themselves.

Co-housing has been a novelty in the UK - there is no incentive for a housebuilder to go down the co-housing route, and my village is an example because it was a joint venture between London County Council and an enlightened social housing architect Eric Lyons. Modern examples are few and far between, but I encourage readers to look at the Marmalade Lane development in Cambridge.

Co-housing is a Liberal cause because it involves a high level of community engagement. My council ward has three councillors for 1,600 homes, but

*“The regulatory landscape has been rigged against councils building new homes”*

my neighbourhood has six committee members for 142 homes. It's a bottom-up system of delivering hyperlocal services by people who will have an excellent knowledge of their remit, because it's so focused

Britain is a very lopsided country politically and economically. Most of the power and the wealth is concentrated in London and the Home Counties. Left to their own devices developers and housebuilders will make the country even more lopsided - there are masterplans for 70,000 new homes within 15 miles of me and overdevelopment has the potential to cause huge problems.

## **HUGE BURDEN**

A recent example of the laissez-faire attitude towards national planning is the emergence of a data centre cluster in west London. All of a sudden this has placed such a huge burden on electricity supply it's led to a cessation of all other development in the area. No such problem in free enterprise America - they actually have thought this through and place data centres in the rust belt or next to hydro-electric dams, power rich locations in the middle of nowhere.

We've got to the point where the south east is stretched for essential supplies such as water and electricity.

Instead of just using semantics such as 'levelling up', we need a genuine regional policy that's backed up with money and more autonomy. I propose creating zones where councils can retain stamp duty receipts and spend the money on housing - this would be particularly useful in touristy areas such as Cornwall or Cumbria that are blighted by second homes and Airbnb lets. I would also encourage footloose digital industries to locate away from the south east by beefing up grants for start up industries across Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the north.

We believe in a federal, decentralised Britain. If this vision is ever realised properly it would amount to a greater level of regional equality, close to that achieved in Germany or Italy. Aside from a few development hotspots in Manchester, Birmingham and Edinburgh the area north of the Wash-Severn line is not receiving enough new homes, jobs, opportunities or infrastructure.

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Matt Pennell is a construction and technology journalist and a Liberal Democrat member since 2015 active in London and Kent

# PAINTING FOR UKRAINE

## Maksym Kravchuk explains how a group of mural painters have tried to keep up Ukrainian morale in the face of Russian attacks

My name is Maksym Kravchuk. I am from Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine. I am the founder of the Future Generation charitable foundation.

Since the beginning of the war in 2022, I, my wife and our friends have been actively volunteering. We help residents of our community, internally displaced persons, refugees, as well as the armed forces of Ukraine.

My wife, Liudmyla Kyryliuk, is an artist. Together with our team of artists, we create murals in Ukrainian cities. We really like the city of Energodar, it is one of the youngest cities in Ukraine. Energodar is located 50 kilometers from Zaporizhzhia. It is the home of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant.

In a few years, we created three murals there at the power plant. After Russian troops blew up the Kakhovka hydroelectric plant, the Kakhovka reservoir quickly became shallow. This detonation created ecocide and the threat of a nuclear disaster at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, which requires a watershed for cooling. We hope that residents of our region and city will not need to be evacuated. The Ukrainian authorities engage in information policy among the population in order to avoid panic. We believe that everything will be fine.

But we can see with our own eyes how much the water level in the Dnipro river has fallen. In our opinion, this is a minus of about four meters. These landscapes are unusual for our eyes. Now it is possible to walk along the coastline of Khortytsia Island, which has been under water for almost 70 years. Our Zaporozhians rallied and went to Toloka to remove the garbage that was previously under water.

We know that now the whole world is following the events in Ukraine. The Japanese, who have the

experience of Fukushima, are very concerned about us. We periodically communicate with one of their TV channels about events in Ukraine.

Ukrainians have European values. And we are very grateful to Great Britain, as our ally, for the help you provide to Ukraine. The USA, European countries also help us a lot. We will defend our independence.

Many Ukrainian women and children were forced to go abroad as refugees. Because it is impossible to live normally in conditions of constant air raids and shelling. Even now, at night, as I write this article, the air alarm is sounding. Many of our friends from Zaporozhye are now temporarily moving with their children to other cities and countries. In Zaporizhzhia, it is dangerous even to go to school and kindergarten normally, because the front is only 30 kilometers from the city. And the S-300 missiles arrive here.

But many children still remained in the city, besides, many families moved here from the occupied territories. Our son is five years old, he is always with us, and he is learning to help people. One of the focuses of our charity fund is helping children. We arrange various activities for children. For example, we treat them with cotton candy, milkshakes, ice cream, distribute children's clothes, diapers, and baby food. Every Sunday we show the children cartoons in the bomb shelter underground, because it is the safest there.

During the war, people open a new side in their eyes. Someone disappoints you and runs away. And some are always ready to help. I really value people like my volunteers. We are all united and united by one goal - our common victory. At the very beginning of the war, we painted the Zaporozhye Military Hospital with patriotic inscriptions to support our defenders

and medical personnel. Our artists also paint military helmets for a charity auction. We used military paint to mark the banners and send them to the front. Also, we sent generators to the front. They were helpful wherever they could.

Winter was a big test for us, when the Russians purposefully hit our local infrastructure, power plants, and boiler houses with missiles. They wanted the civilian population to freeze and lose heart. But Ukrainians are an indomitable people. And all this united us even more against the enemy.

I believe that Ukraine will have a European future and I am ready to help develop our country. Now I am a deputy of the Zaporizhzhia City Youth Council, and this is a useful experience for me as a public





figure who is studying for a master's degree in public management and administration.

You must one day visit Ukraine. Ukraine is a very good country for tourism. I invite you all to visit our glorious Cossack city and I'm ready to be your tour guide, of course, after our victory, it will be much safer for tourists here. But we love our native land and will not go anywhere from here. Glory to Ukraine. Glory to heroes.

You have already done a lot for our country. Be with us, help Ukraine win this war.. We will be indebted to you all our lives.

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Maksym Kravchuk is director of Future Generation.  
zpfuture@gmail.com [www.facebook.com/mvkravchuk](http://www.facebook.com/mvkravchuk)



# FRANCE'S CHICKEN IS GETTING PLUCKED

France's errors and arrogance have fuelled jihadists, Russian mercenaries and dictators in Africa, but the west could learn some lessons, says Rebecca Tinsley

When President Francois Mitterrand described France's relationship with its former African colonies he said, "France is the big hen followed by the little black chicks."

The late French leader was so determined to keep his imperial flock together that he approved Operation Turquoise, training and funding the Francophone Hutu insurgents responsible for the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Local witnesses told me that each day during the 100 days of the slaughter, a French plane brought more weapons with which the Interahamwe could murder the country's one million Anglophone Tutsis.

Mitterrand must be spinning in his grave. France's hold over its 'black chicks' has been undermined by a toxic mix of jihad insurgency, climate change, Russian misinformation, Chinese investment and demography. Mali, the Central African Republic (CAR), Burkina Faso, Niger and Gabon – all former satrapies of France – have recently decoupled. France is reduced to scuttling around Africa, anointing kleptocratic and undemocratic family dynasties in Chad and Cameroon in order to cling to its flock.

## BULLET HOLES

When I arrived at my hotel in Ndjamen, the capital of Chad, in 2017, I remarked on the bullet holes in the reception wall. The receptionist pointed out the window, saying, "A few months ago the rebels got this far, about 200 meters from the presidential palace. They drove their armoured personnel carriers along here. Then the French flew over and strafed them, and all hell let loose." My host then thoughtfully instructed me on how to get to the British embassy on foot, in case the next coup attempt occurred while I was in residence. These preliminaries over, I was shown to my room.

The following morning at breakfast, groups of white people slouched over their tables, smoking, nursing beers at 8am, sporting shaved heads and bulging, tattooed biceps. And that was just the female soldiers: meet Operation Barkhane, the 3,000-strong outpost of the French Foreign Legion headquartered in Chad, 2014-22. When President Deby was killed in 2021, Macron rushed to Ndjamen to confer his blessings on Deby's son. Unsurprisingly, the threat of coups persists.

In Cameroon, where the restive Anglophone minority have been oppressed for decades, the Quai d'Orsay has bestowed its blessings on Franck Biya, the son of 90-year-old dictator. In neither Chad nor Cameroon do the French say much about human rights abuses, the killing or imprisonment of peaceful opponents, the crushing of civil society, rigged

elections or the absence of free speech. The aim of French foreign policy would appear to be keeping the last faithful chicks close to Mother Hen.

Coined by the 19th-century French geographer Onésime Reclus, 'Francophonie' was a call to colonise Africa for its natural resources. At the 1885 Berlin Conference, France took the largest slice of "the magnificent African cake".

Since 1990, there have been 28 coups in sub-Saharan Africa, of which 80% were in Francophone countries. When Britain, Portugal and Belgium left their colonies at independence, the French remained, fostering close relationships in local business, military and political circles.

"They have to keep quiet, to be silent as much as possible; every single word they pronounce is used against them," said Moussa Mara, Mali's former prime minister. "But this is the French attitude, unfortunately; they are not able to keep quiet."

Assimi Goita is the interim president of Mali who led the 2021 coup against the government supported by France. A special forces commander, he had served alongside French troops in operations against the jihadist insurgency. He claims French officers put Malian troops to the front where they sustained "100 Malian casualties for every one French casualty." He also claims the French were selling weapons to the jihadists.

In July 2023, disgruntled generals staged a coup in Niger where the democratically elected president, Bazoum, was seen as a puppet of France. Russia's disinformation campaign contributed to dislike of the French, but the heavy-handed tactics of Bazoum's predecessor Issoufou did not help.

Paris's neo-colonial overtones were counter-productive. France "will not tolerate any attack against France and its interests" in Niger, a statement from Macron's office said. "They have until tomorrow to renounce this adventurism, these personal adventures, and restore democracy," added French foreign minister Catherine Colonna to no effect. The US deputy secretary of state, Victoria, Nuland, was also sent packing.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), threatened military action and then retreated when several members refused to participate. The ECOWAS head, Nigeria's president Tinubu, was left dangling when his own senate rejected the idea, fearing it might ignite even more unrest in northern Nigeria. Between January and June 2023, there have been 1,800 terrorist attacks in West Africa, most of them in Nigeria, resulting in 4,600 deaths. Nigeria also fears the arrival of refugees

from Niger.

The USA, with 1,000 military personnel in Niger, has not used the words coup or junta. It wants to keep reasonable relations with Niger because its priorities are: keeping its counter-terrorism operations there active; maintaining its two drone bases; securing access to uranium. Everything else is rhetoric.

In Niger, the international community will likely accept a vague and meaningless commitment from the junta to transfer power to a civilian administration in due course, preferably at the ballot box, just as they did, with disastrous consequences, in Sudan after the October 2021 coup. Land-locked Niger is economically dependent on Nigeria, so sanctions and decoupling are unrealistic. Less attention is paid to the significant links with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, both of whom are involved in big infrastructure projects. China is the second largest investor, after France. In other words, bringing about change through disengagement, as France wants, will not be easy.

Since 9/11, the US has spent \$3.3bn in the region on 'military assistance' (not including Department of Defense capacity-building programmes), training 86,000 soldiers in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Senegal and Mauritania, while the UK has trained soldiers in Sudan. American and French officers trained Nigerian soldiers in techniques, but not how to protect civilians. (A House of Commons committee recently came to the same conclusions about UK military training on the continent). Some of those officers have gone on to lead coups. This should prompt a review of how the West tries to defeat Islamist insurgencies, perhaps by prioritising the strengthening of governance, institution-building and civil-military reforms.

Niger has revoked all military agreements with France, meaning 1,500 French military personnel must leave. They have banned France24 and RFI media outlets, to the delight of the Kremlin which has run an intensive disinformation campaign in Niger for years.

The former French Ambassador to UNESCO, Rama Yade, says Western involvement in the Sahel has failed. Having relied on troop deployments and defence agreements, "Africa's Western partners are leaving these presidents to face their downfall without any strategy that would help them to connect with the civilian populations."

Yet, France's economic interests in La Francophonie persist. The French Council of Investors in Africa claims anti-French sentiment is more about politics than France per se. France has 200 subsidiaries in Mali, 45 in Burkina Faso, 30 in Niger and 10 in the CAR. Their uranium operations in Niger have continued uninterrupted throughout the coup period.

Russia's infamous Wagner Group, a private military contractor (PMC), offers customers a simple deal: it protects unpopular leaders in exchange for lucrative mining and timber concessions. Wagner has prospered

*"Groups of white people slouched over their tables, smoking, nursing beers at 8am, sporting shaved heads and bulging, tattooed biceps. And that was just the female soldiers"*

because of privatisation policies, discredited UN peacekeeping and failed Western interventions. Wagner says it fights insurgencies, but there is no evidence it reduces jihadist terrorism, and much evidence that civilian deaths increase. It was defeated by jihadists in Mozambique; in Mali, its human rights violations are a recruiting tool for Islamist fundamentalists. For this reason, Burkina Faso has cooled on links with Wagner.

Aided by a systematic campaign of disinformation originating in Russia, Wagner has worked in Sudan, Libya, the CAR, Mali and Burkina Faso. As part of Putin's civilisational project, similar Russian

PMCs will continue the late Prigozhin's profiteering across the Sahel, from Mauritania on the Atlantic to Eritrea on the Red Sea. It suits Putin if the violence accompanying Russia's PMCs provokes immigration to Europe where it has a toxic effect on domestic politics.

The French have only themselves to blame for Russia's strength in CAR. In 2017, French diplomats advised President Touadere to hire a Russian PMC to keep him in power. Foreign Minister Lavrov supplied weapons and training, and Russia midwived a peace deal (which didn't hold). CAR was plunged back into uncertainty when the West predictably pushed for a premature election. Wagner doesn't control CAR – no one does – but they are involved in business, the military and diplomatic functions of government, with all the corruption that entails.

## KREMLIN RHETORIC

Yet, the Kremlin's anti-colonial rhetoric only goes so far. Just because African leaders have been developing links with China and Russia, it doesn't mean they don't want relationships with the West. They increasingly refuse to be forced into binary choices, a fact that France, and the West, does not seem to have grasped. African leaders will soon bore of the BRICs group unless they get something from it, such as debt relief.

Some African intellectuals wonder if France has yet to recover from the shame of Nazi occupation and Vichy complicity during World War Two. Critics suggest the Elysee Palace cannot define a new post-colonial role, labouring under the misapprehension that it matters much more than it does."France has power as part of the EU and NATO, but not as a former empire, bossing around the locals."

By ignoring the human rights abuses and kleptocracy of pliable leaders, France and the West have fuelled the jihadist narrative. Angry, unemployable young men find joining a militia more attractive than farming a small, barren piece of land in an increasingly hot, dry climate. Without education, health services or land reform, they have no stake in the future. When people become disillusioned by the military juntas ruling them (note that the new boss of

Continued on Page 37

# THE GREAT POWERS SHIFT

Unresolved realignments are in progress involving China, India, the USA, Russia and the EU, and the UK must draw close again to the latter or face trouble, says George Cunningham

A great geopolitical realignment taking place, a part of that historic cycle of the rise and fall of great powers. It is a realignment of a globalised world whose people seem divided and increasingly intolerant of each other, leading to a clash of interests and values. It will not necessarily be a peaceful realignment. It must be managed by all of us – with attempts at a lot of mutual understanding - as best we can.

Relationships between nations and peoples are being impacted across the world. The rise of China is especially causing multiple realignments, as countries position themselves to take advantage of the opportunities that rise may bring – while trying to shield themselves against the threats.

I was recently in Tel Aviv to discuss how Israel might create a strategy on China. Israel is trying a balancing act between an economically-important China and its security alliance with the USA - which wants Israel to stop selling high-end technology to China.

President Xi was visiting the Gulf at the time. China had just brokered a deal for diplomatic ties to be restored between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Yet the USA remains the number one security partner of the region. The desert sands are shifting, and all Middle Eastern countries are trying to balance their interests, trying to extract concessions from all sides.

## DILEMMAS AND OPPORTUNISTIC MOVES

The game for smaller countries seems now to try to avoid being reliant on any single camp. They want to be courted by all sides. Everywhere there are dilemmas and opportunistic moves for self-interest.

By 2075, the three main global economic players are forecast to be China, India and the USA. Their economies in real GDP terms are forecast to surpass US\$50tn dollars each. The EU will be around US\$30tn. Other countries, including the UK and Russia, lag far behind. The UK's economy is forecast to be just an eighth of the size of China by 2075.

The EU is therefore perhaps heading towards becoming a second league world player rather than a great power, strong enough to look after itself if it can act united for the common good with determination and wise leadership.

The UK therefore needs aligns itself as closely as possible with the EU. Its objective must be to rejoin the EU when it can also convince the EU it can be a responsible member state. In the meantime, the UK should aim to rejoin the single market to benefit from the EU's economic weight as part of the collective whole.

What are the essential five key factors in play for the UK and the EU to survive great power rivalry?

Firstly, Europe's unique selling point must continue to be the world's bastion of universal values: freedom, rule of law, democracy and respect for human rights. This remains highly attractive to the majority of the world, irrespective of what many governments may say. With uncertainty as to the future course of US politics after its 2024 presidential election, Europe is the only reliable global defender and advocate of universal values. The UK's soft power can be very helpful. Meantime, we must do everything we can to ensure we keep home-grown populism in Europe at bay.

However, the projection of those values will need to be much more subtle, targeted and seen to apply to all countries the same way. We should not be perceived to preach, as many ordinary people in the world are now vociferous about the West's own perceived shortcomings. This is part of the reason why we are not sufficiently winning the argument on Ukraine in the Global South.

We must overcome, in particular, disinformation which calls into doubt our values, such as the anti-colonial narrative promoted by Russia (irrespective of its own colonial past) in the Global South and which has spread within our own societies.

Secondly, Europe must act together with greater resilience and unity. This is the famous strategic autonomy espoused by President Macron. But let it be clear, this does not mean being anti-US. It means making our minds up for ourselves and then deciding which partners are best to pursue each interest.

The exception at the moment is our security and defence, which makes the US the indispensable partner of the UK and Europe. As we cannot predict its reliability in that role forever, it is absolutely imperative that Europe does create its own capacity to act independently within NATO for as long as the US remains committed to trans-Atlantic security, and outside NATO, when EU and UK interests demand it.

The UK's substantial security and defence know-how should be a vital part of that. And UK and France's veto-wielding permanent seats will need to be preserved in any attempted reform of the UN Security Council.

Thirdly, we need to be much more flexible in how we deal with countries in the Global South which are not wanting to take sides in this evolving world order.

We changed our rhetoric some time ago with the Global South, calling them "partners". But we need now to really work with them as partners, listening and trying to meet their needs much better.

It would be foolish for the West to try to match China's infrastructure-building Belt and Road

initiative head-on; but it needs to assist countries in the Global South especially with their digital highways and technological development, giving them the skills to become prosperous by themselves. This should

be supplemented by trade deals matching more closely the needs of the Global South.

Many countries in the Global South say the time for traditional overseas development assistance is over - what they need now is truly open markets for their goods, investment especially in processing their own raw materials and skills transfer. In other words, strategic autonomy for themselves, in their own right.

## NO LONGER TOP DOG

Fourthly, if we want to keep the current world liberal order, our multilateral institutions should be more representative of evolving new power structures. This would mean the West would no longer be the top dog at the table at the World Bank and IMF for instance. However other countries would feel they have more ownership of the current international system – and stick with it.

This is preferable to the Global South signing up to Chinese-led initiatives such as the Global Security Initiative, Global Development Initiative, and other Chinese Global ‘Tom Cobbley and All’ Initiatives which aim to overturn the current world liberal order and create a new or competing international system based on an authoritarian model. The concern, however, would be that too many players becoming involved could render decision-taking unmanageable.

Such a reform would be extremely difficult to achieve. The US would not wish to shed its de facto control of the World Bank, nor Europe its chairing of the IMF.

This is a mistake. And there would be the danger that China and Russia would try to ride both horses, increasing power in existing institutions while continuing to pursue turning the international system into a more authoritarian model. Despite many declarations of the need to reform the system, it looks hard to put into practice – but we must try.

Fifthly the expansion of the BRICs is a warning of the possible start of the creation of an alternative economic system. In August, Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa issued invitations to an economically rather disparate but politically significant set of countries - Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and UAE - to join their grouping in January 2024.

This news was quickly followed by President Xi declining to attend the G20 summit in New Delhi (a slap in the face for India). This means for China that the G20 as the primary forum uniting the twenty most important developed and developing economies across the world is less important to her ambitions than what may become the alternative economic system of BRICS+, overshadowing and in competition with the G7 economies.

*“Europe’s unique selling point must continue to be the world’s bastion of universal values”*

The West may be lucky for now that the BRICs are not very united in pursuing their goals. India is in dispute with China over borders while being heavily courted by the USA. Brazil under President Lula is a liberal democracy too. South Africa under its ANC

government is sadly – but not irrevocably – leaning towards China/Russia camp for now, having recently conducted naval exercises with the two authoritarian powers.

President Xi was heard telling Vladimir Putin in March this year: “Right now, there are changes, the likes of which we have not seen for 100 years. And we are the ones driving these changes together”.

Of course, their paramount interest is to weaken the United States – and divide Europe from the United States to achieve this. Yet China at the same time is squeezing all it can get out of Russia economically while expanding its influence in Russia’s Central Asian backyard. They also have a long common border which is diplomatically resolved for now but can be the focus of dispute anew. China is moving carefully in stages to achieve the dominant position in the world, playing a very long game.

However what India does matters greatly to China’s plans. India is currently the ‘swing state’, with interests in both the US/Europe and Russian camps (while being in conflict on its border with China). Vying for India’s support is, of course, a major objective of the Great Powers. But rather than being non-aligned, India is in fact aligning the future of its security increasingly with the US while economically through the BRICs, with the direction being navigated by the dominant economic power within the grouping, China.

The future will also hinge on the quality and nature of world leadership. We would surely all welcome China’s rise if it were democratic and peaceful. But authoritarian leaders, such as President Xi Putin are obsessed with going down in history as great leaders, irrespective of the human cost. Neither can we be certain of the US post-2024, especially if a centrist third party candidate shaves off enough votes to let Trump back in. And that’s not factoring the possibility of the world sliding into a Third World War.

Europe needs to be able to look after itself in such a difficult political climate – and not to dawdle about doing it. For that to succeed, the UK, EU countries and their neighbours must draw closer together and truly pool their sovereignties to ward off Great Power predators. Our populations need to understand what is happening in the wider world, despite the cost-of-living crisis which understandably currently absorbs their daily lives. Can we produce the leadership in Europe as a whole capable of achieving a common strategic vision and a way to drive it through? UK and European Elections are due in 2024. The jury is out.

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George Cunningham, is chair of the Lib Dem Federal International Relations Committee subcommittee on China and is a former European External Action Service diplomat

# “KILL THEIR CHILDREN”

## Ruth Bright reports on the abuse faced by Gypsies and Travellers and some causes for Lib Dem credit

The striking image of a man on a black horse fills the screen and the atmosphere builds with tense music. He is one of the Peaky Blinders, a Romany family of inter-war Birmingham gangsters. Viewers love their villainous glamour and shabby chic gypsy world.

But it seems we like our Roma, Romany people, Gypsies and travellers (RGT is not the perfect acronym, but I will use it here) fictionalised, glamourised and preferably in the past.

They get a different reception when they take to the road with ponies or arrive with camper vans, kiddies and deck chairs at a local park. Here is a tiny taste of comments from local papers in Basingstoke and Southampton at recent Gypsy ‘incursions’ in Hampshire: “Get the army to bulldoze their vans”, “Vile subjects and just expect the world to pay for their way of life”, “Irish PIKEY filth”. And, more ingeniously: “poikeys”, “nikeys”, “piequays” (because they know the ethnic slur “pikey” will usually be taken down). Just a few months ago I had to call a local paper to take down from its website comments likening Gypsies to vermin and advocating the killing of Gypsy children.

Politicians know what they are doing when they stir this pot. Deputy prime minister Oliver Dowden defended the Welsh secretary David TC Davies who had represented a perfectly responsible consultation on traveller sites by Monmouthshire County Council as: “Would you like to see a traveller site next to your house?” he asked in an ‘important update’ to his constituents. As the Travellers’ Times website has pointed out if you substituted any other ethnic group, that comment would be totally unacceptable.

Meanwhile the Conservative MP for North East Hampshire says Gypsies in Hampshire do not, when they are moved on, need to be moved to an authorised site in Hampshire, the county of their choice or birth, but can make do with neighbouring Berkshire.

He exhibits no consciousness or respect for the deep roots travelling people have in Hampshire (first mentioned in parish records in 1638 and probably present in the county much longer). He contrasts “unruly” travellers with “law abiding citizens”. Not so much a dog whistle as a fog horn.

How do the Lib Dems fare on this issue? A mixed bag. In 2011 I was appalled to receive an e-mail from a Lib Dem parish councillor railing against “pikeys” and “Irish”. When I complained, Tim Farron, then party president, could not have been more supportive, but no sanction came forth from the lethargic complaints’ system. We all know of the repulsive sign landlords would put up in the 1950s: “No blacks, no dogs, no Irish”.

A travellers’ organisation has asked MPs to pledge to stand up to discrimination, and work to ensure members of Gypsy and Traveller communities have a place to live with the slogan: “Irish, Gypsies, Travellers Welcome here” but their website says that so far only one Lib Dem MP, Alastair Carmichael, has signed.

Where Lib Dems can feel pride is in opposing the changes to the public order legislation which will make nomadic life well-nigh impossible. The updated emphasis on predicting ‘3Ds’ disruption, distress and damage means that there are perverse incentives for authorities to emphasise the impact of an ‘incursion’ rather than work for harmony.

About 200 Irish Travellers appeared in our local park last summer. The vast majority were organised, tidy and polite on the numerous occasions I walked through the park. The police moved them on mid evening, ignoring that many had young children and would have to find somewhere else before nightfall. As they began to drive very cautiously in convoy across the park a police officer called to me: “Be careful madam or they will run you down”. What, at 5mph? It was a ludicrous thing for him to say. I experienced no distress or disruption and saw no damage but it was a clear sign that these 3Ds formed the entire approach to the police’s handling of the situation.

These communities are uniquely vulnerable. The Samaritans recently produced a powerful film about how big a taboo it is for Gypsies and Travellers to seek help. The suicide rate for Irish Travellers is a monstrous 1:11. Infant mortality is high. Gypsy and Traveller women in the UK are 20 times more likely to lose a child prematurely than other women. Last year a report showed that there are cavernous gaps in antenatal and obstetric support for RGT women.

I began with the romanticisation and fictionalisation of Romany people in Peaky Blinders. The vast majority are neither saints nor villains, not glamorous but ordinary. All most wish for is more authorised sites so they can continue a nomadic lifestyle with dignity and safety for their children. Nomadic lifestyles and Romany people have been part of this country for nigh on half a millennium.

The beauty of Liberalism is its sheer clarity. “None shall be enslaved by... conformity” and no nomad should be settled against their will because of stigma, dislike or state power.

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Ruth Bright is a former Lib Dem parliamentary Candidate for East Hampshire, her late father was a Romany speaker



# THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE ULEZ

## Blaise Baquiche says his efforts to campaign on Covid-19 and Partygate in Boris Johnson's old seat were drowned out by a ruthless Tory campaign over vehicle emissions

July's by-election in Uxbridge and South Ruislip will go down as one of Britain's barmiest ever - 17 candidates, 33 media interviews, three cancelled hustings, two resignations, one disastrous mayoral policy and it all came down to 495 votes.

Yet my first attempt at a Westminster seat did not disappoint. In fact, it was the greatest thing I've ever done.

With just a week until polling day, the polls predicted Labour would storm to victory with a whopping 53% of votes.

Yet they snatched defeat from the jaws of victory, the campaigning frenzy becoming a masterclass in how to lose an election. Or for the Tories, it was a textbook example of ruthlessly turning an embarrassing by-election into a single-issue campaign and winning.

"It's not a referendum on ULEZ!" I hollered at my Tory opponent from across the hustings stage. But I was just screaming into the void, the Conservatives successfully weaponised ULEZ, an issue completely out of the hands of MPs.

Despite there being two anti-ULEZ independents on the ballot paper, Tory candidate Steve Tuckwell self-branded as the only man "who could stop the mayor's dictatorial policy". Tory literature went out without any reference to the Conservative party, prime minister or previous MP, just the words 'No to ULEZ' in big block letters.

For what it's worth the Lib Dem' had a nuanced position on ULEZ. With the help of London Assembly member Hina Bokhari, I honed some lines on how we were obviously pro-cutting air pollution. "But what's the point," we asked, "in a scrappage scheme, if practically nobody is entitled to it?"

Well, after the by-election and only a week before the ULEZ extension was introduced, Sadiq Khan expanded the £2,000 ULEZ grant to all Londoners with non-compliant vehicles. Even though the cost of upgrading a vehicle would be at least ten times that figure.

But our qualified lines were ignored by a media which had no time for nuance and was only interested in watching the Tories and Labour knock bricks out of each other over ULEZ. Labour candidate Danny Beales announcing live on stage that he'd withdrawn his support for the mayor's policy stunned the hustings audience.

I wanted to draw voters' attention to the very reason we were having this by-election in the first place. Partygate for me was personal, I lost my father who I lived with to Covid-19 in the very week that Johnson partied. I found Johnson's lack of contrition sickening and I believe I represented hundreds and thousands of

families who felt the same way.

Pushing this issue unrelated to the future MP's work may sound hypocritical, but I felt it was important to remind voters about what the practical effects of Tory party incompetence meant. The fact that Tuckwell was unable to condemn Johnson stuck in my craw.

Yet Partygate had long been forgotten and the news cycle rolled on. Had the by-election happened in the summer of 2022, it would've been a different story. Unlike the Labour and Tory candidates, I was chosen as PPC a year before the by-election, through a relatively scandal-free process. Labour went through a chaotic selection parachuting in a Starmerite to replace the democratically elected local Corbynista. No wonder their party chair resigned immediately after the vote.

Since last summer I had been talking to locals and high street businesses and was largely frustrated. There were pressing issues for the people of Uxbridge and South Ruislip, namely the shocking state of Hillingdon Hospital and the constant state of limbo for Uxbridge Police Station. But in Metroland, ULEZ dominated and destroyed.

We knew it would be tough to get coverage. A non-target seat, we weren't expecting much help from HQ and I'm delighted tactical voting worked in Somerton & Froome. We studiously followed the mantra of 'pick a ward and win it' in Hillingdon East. Yet we also ran a Facebook ad in South Ruislip, Cllr Tuckwell's ward, surprisingly generating a higher turnout than all the campaigning we did in Hillingdon East.

Moreover, I received a crash course in batting away the not-so-pressing issues, such as wild conspiracy theories. Brunel University played host to two hustings, the first a respectable affair with Tory and Labour candidates present. These two dropped out for the second, which descended into a cesspit of hate with constant heckles about the World Economic Forum, vaccines, and of course trans rights. Candidates Piers Corbyn and Laurence Fox were in their element and as the only major party present, I suddenly became the voice of Government (and of reason).

Running in a by-election is not for the faint-hearted, but I would encourage anyone who doesn't live too far away from a recently vacated seat to apply. There's always an extra level of media scrutiny given journalists aren't covering the whole country as in a general election. But if/when you do run, make sure you treasure all the media exposure you can get. It's the perfect training for any budding politician.

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Blaise Baquiche was the Liberal Democrat candidate in the Uxbridge and South Ruislip by-election

# THE COUNTRY THAT DOESN'T EXIST

Somaliland is a stable democracy shunned by the world as breakaway state. Keith House says after a recent visit that recognition is overdue

The traffic ground to a halt on the edge of the city. Chronic congestion with too many vehicles manoeuvring in too tight a space, with pedestrians and traders with goods and in places animals filling the gaps in between, defied the chances for vehicles to move.

Hargeisa is much like any other large African city around the Sahel and the Horn of Africa. Development pressures squeeze more and more homes and small businesses into areas with limited opportunities to enhance infrastructure.

As an African capital, Hargeisa has many of the usual trappings. A national monument, somewhat unusually a fighter jet from its liberation war. Government ministries, occupying large sites with tall buildings and brightly lit signs for agriculture, energy, health and more. Yet unlike other premier cities the standout with Hargeisa is a lack of embassies and consulates. Even hard to reach and poor places, like Niger, Burkina Faso and Djibouti have these.

Hargeisa is different. It is the capital of a country that does not exist. Welcome to the Republic of Somaliland.

A little history is required to start to understand. British Somaliland was a protectorate

administered by Britain from 1884, south and east of Ethiopia on the Horn of Africa with the Gulf of Aden and Yemen to the north. To its east lies the Federal Republic of Somalia, the former Italian Somaliland protectorate. International law is clear: Somaliland is part of Somalia.

The quirk in this history lies with the way the protectorates were established, with often straight lines on maps drawn by colonial powers, and the scramble for decolonisation in the 1960s. Oddities abound across Africa and the Middle East. The resultant nation states exist with varying degrees of integrity and success, often regardless of tribal and clan ties and natural geography.

Somalia/Somaliland is one of the failures. Somalia proper has been riven with civil war for decades. It reaches the world news agenda for all the wrong reasons: bombings in Mogadishu, piracy off the coast in the Indian Ocean, failed attempts at diplomacy to establish the rule of law and a nation state.

The deal designed to unite the 1950s protectorates aimed to be straightforward. The various parts of the new Somalia would take local decisions to end the protectorates and unite. For Somaliland this process commenced with the end of the Protectorate on 26 June 1960 and a resolution by the Legislative

Assembly the following day to merge on 1 July with its neighbours in Puntland and Italian Somaliland to form the new Somalia.

## TURNING SOUR

Five days of independence, along with recognition by 35 states in that period, were to turn sour in just a year with the Mogadishu government taking over local institutions in Somaliland and imposing its will against local wishes.

Thirty years of trauma followed for Somaliland with a resistance movement developing



and a period of civil war in the 1980s before finally in 1991 Somali forces withdrew and a unilateral Declaration of Independence made based on the boundaries of the old British protectorate. The next steps have proved unique in Africa. Somaliland established its own democracy bringing together parts of the former British systems of law and governance and adding clan and tribal traditions from the local population. Remarkably, despite some and indeed current bumps along the road, democracy has survived and become entrenched. Across mainland Africa there are few such examples of democratic stability. Botswana is perhaps the only other state that can make such a claim.

Three questions stand out for Somaliland. How has it progressed in these more than thirty years? Why has it not been recognised as a sovereign state? And what is the future, not just for Somaliland but for other breakaway territories?

The first two questions are easier to answer than the third, which possess serious challenges for liberals and democrats.

How is progress? Hargeisa is a buzzing city, now of anything up to two million people. It has a level of development not dissimilar to other cities of its size in and around the Sahel. Some trade and wealth creation has seen modern shops and services with the first malls, hotels, cafe and restaurants to an international standard. Your correspondent was able to indulge in decent coffee shops and even track down a camel burger in a rather nice eatery, and get a decent curry in another.

No booze, of course, as this is a strictly Muslim

*“The risk is that no change, with a lack of opportunity for access to international finance and aid, gradually weaken this established and basically safe place”*

country, with the call to prayer from a multitude of mosques enveloping and soothing the city periodically. The place has a sense of optimism and hope, of improvement rather than decay. The presence of women and men together on the streets hints at a modern Islam.

Somaliland is a nation of over three million, more than enough to be self-sustaining given its

broadly homogeneous nature and traditions. Rule of law is strong and democracy has survived perhaps due to its home-grown nature, not having been imposed by a former colonial power. A new constitution, developed locally and backed by a referendum in 2001, was put in place. It has applied for observer status of the Commonwealth. On the coast at Berbera, Dubai Ports World has led a major venture as the main shareholder backed by Somaliland and Ethiopia in a major port developed in the last decade that has real potential for expansion not least if Ethiopia's other routes to the coast become more vulnerable. This local investment is a major transformation for the national economy with export growth for agriculture. There is even some potential for tourism, with 5,000 year old rock art at Laas Geel between Hargeisa and Barbera. Security concerns limit this and other travel options along the coast though cross-border travel, if arduous and bumpy, is possible from Djibouti. Visas on arrival are already available.

Yet the country has obstacles to overcome. It has one of the 10 lowest GDPs per person in the world. It has massive youth unemployment but is far from alone in Africa on that score. It has low levels of literacy that are worse in the young than the old. The economy lacks diversity with a high dependency

on agriculture. It relies heavily on remittances from abroad with one of its main banks being the main lifeline for these. Lacking international recognition it struggles to attract aid from wealthy and nearby nations. Recognition is one of the major avenues to tackling these issues.

So, what of recognition? No independent nation state has recognised Somaliland. Taiwan has done so, but that says as much about Taiwan as Somaliland. Britain, the EU, the US and others have not followed, with the line that they will follow the lead of the African Union (AU). The AU avoids territorial disputes beyond a dalliance with a line on Western Sahara's illegal occupation by Morocco that is increasingly de facto if not yet de jure.

Somaliland is left in limbo. It has informal bases akin to consulates



around the world, including in London, and strong ties with Ethiopia and the UAE. It has informal relations and contacts with governments and aid agencies, but has limited clout to attract investment and aid without formal status and the potential of uncertainty. It is unable to call on world alliances or the UN for support when its territory is threatened.

The AU line on new states has moved twice in recent decades, with the separation of Eritrea from Ethiopia and South Sudan from Sudan. The later, and the formation of what was briefly the darling child of

the western media but descended quickly into civil war, is the fear given stalled but in theory not ended peace talks between Somaliland and Somalia. What if a wider war was reignited? What about the consequences for other wannabe new states around the continent? What of giving an informal green light led to splitting Libya, or Ethiopia? Unlike Eritrea and South Sudan, the divorcing bigger partner does not consent, so the AU remains silent, and so does the wider world.

What of the future, and Somaliland's chances?

World institutions look stuck. In Europe, the case for self-determination typically takes second place to existing state boundaries. Think the fears of Spain on Kosovo given the Catalans and Basques. Think fraught issues of ethnic Russians used as an excuse for cross-boundary grabs in Georgia and Ukraine. What for Transnistria? Don't mention Scotland.

For liberals and for democrats, these are all tricky questions. Britain has used self-determination to preserve its interests in the Falklands/Malvinas and in Gibraltar, with referenda to make the case. At the same time it is held out the occasional offer in Scotland and the north of Ireland to potentially to do the same, even if only where it believes the status quo will prevail.

## SOVEREIGNTY CHECKLIST

No neat solution to these challenges exists. A checklist for sovereignty might assist, and would be a good place for liberals to start. Does the new state have strong ethnic or social ties, distinct from the existing parent state? Is the rule of law in place, with an existing police force, judiciary and (possibly) armed forces? Does it have recognisable boundaries based on geography or history? Is the economy capable of being self-sustained, with its own banking and financial



institutions and (possibly) its own or other tradeable currency?

Somaliland ticks all of those boxes. Its clan and tribal systems are distinct from Somalia and have contributed to a broadly stable democracy. The rule of law is in place despite human rights standards being poor in comparison to the wealthy world but not dissimilar to its neighbours. It has a police force and armed forces. Its boundaries are those that date back at least 139 years. The local shilling along with the US dollar is in use and although the shilling does not trade it is broadly stable with the US dollar. Your correspondent was given odd looks on insisting on using the shilling given it lacks large denomination notes.

A simpler test would be the 1933 Montevideo Convention used for years in the Americas and Europe as a test on nationhood: clear territory, population and political authority.

In all of these areas the case for Somaliland is strong, and as strong if not stronger than were argued for Eritrea and South Sudan. Yet without powerful external advocates, the potential for moving forward is weak. A stable residual Somalia, including the breakaway Puntland that sees its future with Mogadishu, interested in only its own growth and wellbeing, could be the time to make the Somaliland case. The risk is that no change, with a lack of opportunity for access to international finance and aid, gradually weaken this established and basically safe place.

For the residents of Hargeisa, Imboland and no change remains the likely future. The traffic jams look set to continue.

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Keith House is the Liberal Democrat leader of Eastleigh council and recently visited Somaliland

# PITY THE NEXT GOVERNMENT'S INHERITANCE

Addressing the economic crisis requires fleet-of-foot problem-solving efforts, unhindered by turf wars and institutional silos, says Paul Reynolds

President Bill Clinton was famously alleged to have James Carville's slogan 'the economy, stupid' on the wall in his office, in the run up to the 1992 US presidential election amidst a recession.

By the time we get to the 2024 UK general election, it is likely that the economic situation in the country will be even more dire. The last big chunk of Brexit restrictions will have been implemented, more than two million households will be paying much more for their mortgages, investment will have fallen further, skill shortages will still prevail, and perceived 'greedflation' will be running rife.

The UK is fairing badly in economic terms relative to EU and OECD countries, but the UK has little or no wriggle room. This year national debt exceeded 100% of annual GDP, the UK has the highest interest payments in the G7, and tax revenues to the state are shockingly less than a third of GDP.

## BANK'S CASH LOSSES

Half the population pay no income tax at all and the top 1% of earners now account for a third of all UK income tax raised. To put things in perspective, national debt is approaching £90,000 for every income tax payer. Interest on debt is set to exceed total NHS spending by 2027. Additionally Bank of England expected cash losses from quantitative easing (QE) asset purchases already exceeds annual total NHS spending.

Pity the next government. How are political parties responding, especially the Lib Dems? Are they taking Carville's advice? If so, will it lead to a new Lib Dem economic problem-solving approach before the election, or will the party merely stick to highlighting bad economic news and pleading for more money for all government departments?

There are many reasons why the latter is more likely. Most fundamental is the fact that there is little agreement even on the objectives of economic policy in the party. Many members believe that economic growth per se is not just a poor measure of economic development, but a harmful thing to pursue; for example due to environmental damage, 'elite capture' of growth or general exploitation and so on.

Second, economic assumptions differ so widely across the party that proposing serious in-depth economic reforms is often seen as not worth the backlash. Some are 'hyper Keynesians' and others hold to a more classical economic liberal approach. Many among the former see high national debt and

continuing monetisation as entirely non-problematic. Many among the latter are unaware of the extent to which markets (ie absence of monopoly) have been conflated with laissez faire, and impunity for the finance and corporate sectors.

However these divisions have deep international roots, and are thus more understandable. Economic orthodoxy failed in the 1997 and 2008 'crashes' and absent of genuine attempts to address the causes since then, we now have the third western economic crisis in just 25 years. The relative success of the Chinese economy has developed in the background over this period.

Is there a way of looking at these orthodoxies differently such that the current crisis can be addressed?

A good start point is that economics can only ever partially be a science, dismal or not.

It is bound up inextricably with politics, ideology and moral philosophy. Appreciation of problems is riddled with confirmation bias, and pursuit of remedies highly selective and narrow. Economics teaching in the West has become too abstract and separated from the real world. More importantly, the disciplines of macroeconomic, microeconomics and commercial-industrial policy, define and address problems only within their 'silos'

If trade policy, banking regulations, land law, competition rules, R&D problems or skills and welfare policy generate macroeconomic and fiscal problems, they will be addressed primarily through macroeconomic and fiscal means, with scant connection to the causes and their national importance. Reflecting this, UK political parties have 'treasury teams' where the entirety of deep-rooted economic problems are typically remedied through microscopic changes to the tax regime.

Confusion reigns. For example, unlike Japanese economic success in the 1980s and 1990s (which brought to the world concepts like just-in-time manufacturing, Kaizen methods and Keiretsu long-termism) there is no equivalent analysis of the Chinese economic-industrial system from which lessons can be similarly universally applied ... or errors avoided.

Moreover there is not even a measure of consensus on whether China's extraordinary economic growth has been facilitated by its one party system, (supposedly more decisive than 'inefficient and messy' democracy), or by liberalisation ... as advocated by Deng Xiao Ping from 1979. Western politicians have only skimpy

knowledge of the key role that the unusual Chinese lending and equity finance system has played, and whether there are any lessons.

Thus, if the West wishes to compete with China, should economists advocate ditching democracy, or do the opposite; promote accountability and liberalisation? Should the UK play to its strengths or abandon them as outdated?

What's more, the nature of competing ideologies has changed. The economic 'boxing match' was much simpler 25 years ago. In the 'blue corner' were free marketeers and liberalisation advocates, asking for less state spending; sometimes called neo-liberals or advocates of the 'Washington consensus'. In the 'red corner' were advocates of monopoly, command systems, state-owned industry, more state spending, import substitution and state borrowing for investment. Everyone else was seen as somewhere on an axis between the two.

Today there are right wing neo-conservatives and rightist nationalists advocating for more state spending and being more sanguine about unsustainable government debt, monopoly power, crony capitalism and extreme concentration of wealth. Neo-liberals have gradually abandoned their focus on competition and anti-monopoly measures.

## POPULISM MUSHROOMED

Left and right populism has mushroomed. Even free marketeers have interpreted economic freedom as 'laissez faire' - a cover for impunity for big monopolistic corporations; quite the opposite of the intellectual case for 'markets'. But in economic policy, monetary policy and macroeconomics come first, and does not always fit ideological tenets. In that, one thing must be understood. Post crash remedies in 2008 like QE (monetisation) and state debt expansion were intended to be temporary emergency measures. However, they quickly became quasi-permanent economic features; avoiding the cold turkey of the inevitable quantitative tightening to come. The can has been kicked down the road, until now.

QE funds were spent on securities of uncertain value, to keep the pyramid standing, and subsidise the finance sector. This could in the end cost more than £200bn in cash losses (these exceed £150bn to date). Borrowing to stimulate economic activity, now has huge debt service costs. Anticipated inflationary consequences were delayed to 2023 due to a range of factors. These and other measures however have had far-reaching unintended consequences, and weakened the west fundamentally. If politicians don't understand these consequences they cannot remedy them.

Economic stimuli have been captured by the state, propping up increasing inefficiency and lucrative 'contractisation' within governments. QE may or may not have saved the global banking system from collapse in 2008, but they created another addiction; to historically low interest rates; regarded as another economic stimulus to 'western' economies, and as a

*“economic assumptions differ so widely across the party that proposing serious in-depth economic reforms is often seen as not worth the backlash”*

palliative to reduce the discomfort of ballooning state debt, by keeping government borrowing costs down.

One longer term consequence was that banks and other international financial institutions were awash with low or negative-earning cash ... which could not therefore remain as cash. The symptoms were obvious.

It didn't just stimulate demand for government securities, it also stimulated demand shares, which could clearly be seen in rising P/E ratios - the relationship between the price of shares and the yield (profit). Too much money chasing too few assets led to asset price inflation and lower percentage profits.

Underlying profits did not support the rises in share prices, but low or negative interest rates was one reason that companies embarked on share buyback programmes, instead of investing in new projects or modernised systems.

However the main, largely unseen, negative consequence of this phenomenon was relatively rapid international ownership concentration.

With low yield assets everywhere the scale economies of very large investments funds shifted. Quite suddenly it became 'economically rational' to be much bigger. Passive investment money flocked to a hundred or so global investment funds that were large enough to 'engineer' international market and regulatory circumstances through which corporations or other financial institutions could achieve higher profits and escape the curse of low yields and high P/Es.

What's more, if a handful of giant organisations control significant stakes in almost every western mega-corporation, many operating in similar markets, cartels and monopolisation will almost certainly ensue, especially when, in most jurisdictions, such cartels are outwith the scope of standard competition law.

Thus, when input prices started to rise in 2022 and 2023 the usual constraints on their effect on inflation had become absent over the previous 15 years. In particular, creeping monopolisation and cartelisation, plus pro-monopoly regulation resulting from lobbying, all played their part in removing constraints on price rises. The popular press has therefore been quite correct in complaining of 'greedflation' in 023.

The UK has higher inflation and lower growth than most of its OECD rivals. Government spending remains at historical highs but public services have been rapidly in decline, as most people have experienced.

However a key problem in the UK is inefficiency in government, despite (or maybe because of) long, hard hours and low pay; its roots being in contractisation, designed largely to provide profits for hegemonic western investment funds, which is another indirect consequence of QE.

Often laughable bureaucracy, absurd contracting, overlapping institutions, opaque procurement riddled

with conflicts of interest, and obsessive centralisation, all mean that governments can achieve less and less with the same quantity of funds. QE and weak constraints on borrowing, plus reduced accountability, have all meant that the efficiency in government is no longer seen as worth pursuing.

Moreover, in the UK, commercial banking is relatively rigid and excessively risk averse, with many anti-competitive practices. Unlike Japan or China, in the UK banking and finance is more the master of industry than a service to it. QE has worsened this factor, since it has proven more profitable for banks than their primary function; taking deposits and making loans.

To move in the direction of remedies some principles and potential misperceptions are likely to be encountered along the way.

First, it will be increasingly necessary to be serious about priorities in the UK.

Prioritising everything means prioritising nothing. Whilst it is patently true that every part of government requires more funding, more funding alone will not address the problems, and it is not only the case that funds are now very short, but government initiatives have become both wildly expensive and ineffective; from transport investments, apprenticeships, IT systems, military purchases, to new qualifications, trade facilitation and housing policy, and hundreds more.

A range of overdue reforms 'with bite' are required, including increased accountability, procurement/contractisation reform, civil service legislative reform, and fiscal decentralisation and others.

Second, sustainability is a concept that needs broadening. Economic growth needs to be fiscally and socially sustainable (not founded only on borrowing, and not at the expense of income inequalities), as well as environmentally sustainable.

Third, where economic growth itself comes from and what it actually is, needs to be better understood. It can be fully sustainable. The majority of economic growth is 'economically organic' meaning it comes from existing enterprises finding slightly better ways to do things. This dimension of economic growth outshines the more headline-type things like investment in new factories, or revolutionary new inventions. The 'better mousetrap' stuff is the key to sustainable growth.

Fourth, UK poverty reduction only ever attempts half the job. Welfare payments and public services help to dampen the effects of poverty and improve quality of life, but the other side of the coin is getting people out of poverty in the first place. For example, the whole system of mass tertiary education, apprenticeships, skills development, and paths to advanced skills are an awful mess in the UK, resulting in shocking skill levels compared to other OECD countries.

## **BLURRED BOUNDARIES**

Old battle lines over state versus private ownership of commercial assets and real estate have led to quite extreme versions of confirmation bias, despite blurred boundaries between the two. There are many consequences, one of which referred to above is how people see the reasons for China's economic growth.

In China much is made of state control of land, and its use to develop private and state industries and infrastructure. It is reported that more than half

Chinese GDP growth comes from real estate based investment and development.

In the UK such development is hindered by sclerotic and costly planning rules that protect neither the environment nor those wishing to develop businesses or purchase houses. What's more, due to secrecy and lack of full land ownership registration local politicians often cannot even find out, for example, who owns a piece of derelict, unused land.

Old battle lines also create rather odd perceptions about economic regulation; the imperative of more regulation or less regulation. One side might blame economic problems on insufficient regulation (eg the 2008 crash) and others blame economic problems on too much regulation (eg planning rules). But a focus on the quantity of regulation raises the question of how it is measured; number of pages or words, cost of enforcement?

The obvious need is to focus on the quality of regulation. However this leads to enquiry about the criteria through which quality is assessed, monitored and adjusted.

Criteria may include positive costs/benefits, absence of unintended consequences, effect on competition and monopoly, scope for conflicts of interest and regulatory capture, clarity of the purpose of regulation, rules for secondary legislation and so on. Applying such criteria to much of the UK's regulatory landscape would no doubt create much discomfort in Whitehall, especially the application of proper conflict of interest rules.

There are similar false dichotomies over decentralisation, especially fiscal decentralisation. The UK is the most centralised nation in the OECD, especially fiscally. One can think of the harm done to ambulance services, infrastructure investment or enforcement of minimum wage rules. Infrastructure proposals in the north of England with clear return-on-investment logic, sit at the bottom of in-trays in Whitehall for years.

There are many other areas of reform required, but conceptual, ideological and institutional obstacles need to be addressed.

At the forefront must be the problem of ownership concentration and the scope for monopolisation/cartelisation. This affects the UK economy more than most. Tackling this problem is a very long term and difficult endeavour, resisted by some of the world's most powerful non-governmental organisations. The whole set of competition policy mechanisms need to be recast.

Addressing the economic crisis requires fleet-of-foot problem-solving efforts, unhindered by turf wars and institutional silos. As Albert Einstein is reported to have said: "We can not solve our problems with the same level of thinking that created them."

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Paul Reynolds has worked as an adviser on international relations and economics in more than 70 countries. He designed and ran a masters programme in economic and governmental reform at the University of Westminster, London. He was the Liberal Democrat candidate in North West Leicestershire in 2010.

[profpaulreynolds@zoho.com](mailto:profpaulreynolds@zoho.com)

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**POWER GRAB?**

*Dear Liberator,*

I rather enjoyed your 'Court Circular' (Liberator 418). Could I comment on one thing?

While it is true that "Hayes remains aggrieved over the 2019 decision not to accept her as a European Parliament candidate for the East of England", my grievance resulted from more than "an improperly conducted mock media interview".

In March 2019 the government was caught on the hop by European parliamentary elections. So was the English Candidates Committee (ECC). It devised a protocol allowing members to apply simultaneously for selection and addition to the list of approved prospective European parliamentary candidates (PEPCs).

I was approved already. I was shortlisted by the regional shortlisting committee. Members were voting in the e-ballot when I was told to attend a mock media interview. I immediately realised something was amiss. The federal and English party constitutions gave responsibility for shortlisting to shortlisting committees in each Euro-constituency and for selecting to the members, not the ECC. Besides, mock media interviews were meant to be for applicants whose application form did not disclose adequate media experience. Mine did.

Over 30 applicants were axed by the ECC in those selections.

The ECC imposed its own senior returning officer over the heads of returning officers whom regions had already appointed. The senior returning officer ensured that the votes of axed people were not counted. The published tables of results, which did not make arithmetical sense, showed results for the selected candidates and said the others were "unsuccessful".

My protests being ignored, I applied to the Federal Appeals Panel (FAP) on 2 May 2019. On 4 August 2020 I was notified that it had decided I had been wrongly axed and should be compensated. It is Case 3 on the FAP website but, more than three years after it was decided, permission on publication of the ruling is still pending. What can be holding it up?

On 7 January 2021 English Candidates Committee chair Prue Bray asked the FAP to reconsider the decision in Case 3 out of time; it refused. Her application is Case 1 on the FAP website. I received no notice, and what I know about it is limited to what is said in the published decision. Incidentally the sequence of dates on the website is inaccurate and nonsensical. Did Prue really apply to set aside a decision more than a year before it had been decided? No.

English party officers told English Council that the decision in FAP Case 3 was merely "advisory". They refused to implement it.

More than 30 applicants were axed in those selections, fair enough perhaps for those not on the approved list. But some were. The ECC's interference with the selection process, as distinct from approval, was, I suggest, unconstitutional. The federal and

English constitutions entrusted selections for Euro-elections to the Euro-constituencies. Shortlisting committees could have accelerated any interviewing needed, by phone or videoconference; virtual hustings could have been arranged; ECC could have focused on its approval function, assessing new applicants: each party body retaining its proper role. But there was evidently too much distrust of the regional parties for that.

The centre claimed to be authorised by what is now article 19.7A of the Federal Constitution. Even if it applied to European selections, which is doubtful, it only permitted rules to be modified so far as necessary to accelerate the selection process.

How did accelerating the process morph into taking over decisions that were the function of regional shortlisting committees and vetoing choices made by ballot of members? Was this a power grab?

Jo Hayes  
Colchester

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**RICHARD STOKES**

*Dear Liberator,*

My childhood was spent in Southport and among the key leading Labour party members at the time was Richard Stokes who has died at the age of 100. He lived on the same street as my family and was regularly on our doorstep to discuss the latest socialist policies. Even as a child I found him an interesting visitor with his permanent enthusiasm and volubility.

Much later Eric Moonman, another Southport Labour activist and later a Labour and SDP MP, remarked to me: "Dick was the best of us." In 2018 Stokes, at the age of 94, and amid a succession of Labour worthies, spoke at Moonman's memorial without any notes, recalling the past with great clarity and was acknowledged to have made the best contribution.

In 1952 he had been interested in being Labour's prospective parliamentary candidate for Southport but withdrew his name being aware that the party HQ would not approve him. This was proven when he failed to get on the shortlist for Blackpool South with Labour HQ stating "his views on defence policy were incompatible with national policy."

It was not until 1964, in Spelthorne, that he contested a parliamentary seat. He described himself as an "anti-nuclear, pacifist republican" and was certainly more libertarian than statist.

He ended up in Slough where he joined the local Labour party and was elected to the borough council in 1983. However, after four years he left Labour stating: "It bore no resemblance to the party he knew from the north of England."

He was persuaded by John Clark, the charismatic but eccentric Liberal group leader, to join the Liberal party. Richard told me Clark said to him: "Do exactly as I say and you will be elected; I did just that - and was duly elected!" It was the first of eight victories. It was at this time that I met him again after a gap of some 60 years.

In 2004 Labour lost its majority on Slough Council and, at the age of 81, Richard put together and led a four party coalition of Liberals, Liberal Democrats, Conservatives and Independents which ran the borough successfully for four years. He retired from the council in 2012.



He was a tremendous character whose personal life was somewhat diffuse. He was a fine poet and a wine connoisseur who had a special extension built on to his house to accommodate all his bottles.

Michael Meadowcroft  
Leeds

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## HEARING BOTH SIDES

*Dear Liberator*

A reader, who did not check back to see what Gareth Epps (Liberator 418) was responding to, might think he was being attacked for defending the rights of one group. In fact it was he who attacked the idea that anyone with gender critical beliefs has the right to free expression in our party and Zoe Hollowood explained why that would not be legal (Liberator 417).

But free expression matters for a much more important reason. We are a political party who may after the next election be part of government, so the policies we advocate now have potential consequences. To take one example, due to the lack of evidence that they are beneficial and concern that they may be harmful, puberty blockers are now not prescribed under the NHS except for clinical trials.

Current Lib Dem policy is to reverse that and indeed to insist on them as a right – that is to say even if the clinicians have doubts and fear that the long term quality of life of their patient could be impaired.

The stakes for the future lives of the individuals involved are high so it is important that we get it right and that means hearing both sides. Denying the right to members to disagree with current policy makes us blind as a party. That is more important than whether legally a party can deny a group among their members to express their views on a specific issue.

David Barnsdale  
Surbiton  
Member, Liberal Democrat English Council



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## Oppenheimer Christopher Nolan (director)

Christopher Nolan doesn't talk down to you. This film covers the physics, the engineering and, above all, the politics of building the world's first atom bomb.

Nor does he oversimplify the personnel involved or skimp on the casting. We have all the main players from old Tom Conte as Einstein and Kenneth Branagh as Niels Bohr as well as Emily Blunt, Matt Damon, Robert Downey Jnr (the Americans call him "straws" which confused me. He was Strauss) and a surprise appearance of Gary Oldman as Truman.

Cillian Murphy (new to me) is excellent as the man himself. The action moves from Oppenheimer's academic 1930s with his communist friends, through the Manhattan Project to his time as persona non grata to the American establishment in the 1950s. That's a lot of ground and Nolan gives us all of it. We even have cameos of Kurt Gödel, Werner Heisenberg, Richard Feynman, Enrico Fermi and Klaus Fuchs. Benny Safdie gives us the malevolent Edward Teller.

Don't fear this detail. The whole story is well told but you will need to pay attention and your attention will be rewarded.

I spotted one mistake and was told of another. The one I saw was when the script demonstrates Oppenheimer's command of languages. He says that he has read all three volumes of Das Kapital in German (I have owned volume one since an undergraduate and it just sits there on the shelf 50 years later, unread and unreadable even in English). He quotes "property is theft" which is a pity because Proudhon wrote it and Marx did not agree with him. Apparently one scene contains the current American flag with 50 stars when there were only 48 at the time, so if you're a vehement vexillologist, best go and see Barbie instead.

One friend who doesn't admit he's getting deaf said the film was so loud he couldn't hear the dialogue. Sorry they couldn't make a quiet atom bomb. Drawing room comedy it ain't. If you can, then like me see it at an IMAX. I heard every word. There are a lot of new films about (as ever since Covid) but this is a film I'll want to see again and again.

David Grace

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## Dr Semmelweis by Stephen Brown; Tom Morris (dir) Harold Pinter Theatre to October.

A doctor saved many lives by pioneering what is now a healthcare habit – but his ideas were rejected for decades and he is not well known. This riveting play tells the story of the difficult Dr Semmelweis.

Dr Semmelweis is a fast-moving and expressive production that tells the story of a maverick 19th century doctor, determined to save the lives of young women dying of childbed fever.

Hungarian physician Ignaz Semmelweis came up with the idea that people should wash their hands in an antiseptic solution before going into a ward.

Although this practice was effective, his ideas were consistently dismissed by the medical establishment, much to his frustration and fury.

Not long after starting at Vienna General Hospital,

then the biggest hospital in Europe, Semmelweis (played by Mark Rylance) attends a young pregnant woman who begs to be admitted to the midwives' rather than the doctors' ward – outside the hospital, it is common knowledge you were more likely to survive in the former. Despite Semmelweis' assurances about the care she will receive in the doctors' ward, she and her baby die there of childbed fever.

Her fears are borne out; hospital records show that women are far more likely to die in the ward run by doctors than that run by midwives, and the deaths appear to be accepted as routine.

To find out more, Semmelweis approaches head midwife Anna Müller (a terrific performance by Pauline McLynn), at one point taking her to the ballet – with uproarious results. She is well aware of what is happening yet only Semmelweis, not the senior doctors, recognises her knowledge and experience.

He finds that the only difference in circumstances between the women who live and those who die is that the latter are more likely to be attended to by doctors (you don't realise at the time but you get a short lesson in how to run a scientific experiment). Why could this be?

A fellow doctor develops an infection very like childbed fever after being injured with a scalpel during an autopsy – and Semmelweis makes the connection. Doctors went straight to their patients on the ward after attending autopsies, often of women who had died of the infection.

Chlorine solution is used to remove the smell after autopsies, so Semmelweis makes anyone entering the obstetric ward wash their hands in this antiseptic.

His theory proves extremely controversial – how could doctors' routine practice be killing so many women and babies? – and is vehemently rejected by senior medics, including his superior, Professor Johann Klein (Alan Williams).

It was not known then that microorganisms could cause disease, so Semmelweis struggles to explain the theory of how infection spreads. In the meantime, Klein is adamant that a new window in the doctors' ward will reduce deaths.



# REVIEWS

Semmelweis is single-minded and outspoken to the point of aggression. He clashes with his superiors – making accusations of murder – and causes offence when he insists a visiting baroness washes her hands before going into the ward.

Rylance is tremendous as he faces up to the medical establishment and the doctors' entrenched beliefs. His frustration and fury build up, and he eventually breaks down under their unbending refusal to even consider his findings. He becomes impatient and angry with everyone, including his friends and wife Maria (Amanda Wilkin).

The production is a spectacle. Across the stage, the all-female Salomé string quartet plays and dancers whirl, expressing a huge range of emotions, a representation of the mothers who died, reminding us that the deaths are not just numbers.

Semmelweis died aged 47 of infection – probably the result of injuries inflicted by staff – while detained in a psychiatric hospital. Semmelweis' antiseptic theory was not accepted for decades.

Although it tells a grim cautionary tale, it never fails to hold the attention – there's a lot going on on stage at times – and may well give Ignaz Semmelweis the profile he deserves.

Christy Lawrance

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## Is Artificial Intelligence Racist?

### The Ethics of AI and the Future of Humanity by Arshin Adib-Moghaddam Bloomsbury Academic

This fascinating and topical book explores the myths and realities of AI and machine learning, and provides, inadvertently or otherwise, some policy advice for governments.

It is quite riveting in the way

it covers the 'grand sweep of history', finding relevant events from the past which helps shed light on the dangers and pitfalls of AI today. It certainly does help the reader approach the subject from a new and fresh perspective; particularly since it attempts, quite successfully, to navigate around both the predictive extremes of "AI will end the world as we know it" versus "AI is just a new bit of software of little concern." Frequent references to Iranian/Persian philosophers, as well as European figures, are particularly thought-provoking.

It begins by making the point that the machine learning algorithms involved in the provision of AI systems are human creations and thus reflect the flawed logic and ingrained prejudices of humans. AI therefore is, it is explained, neither bias free nor the superior intellect worthy of reverence as portrayed in popular science fiction movies.

By providing a wide range of examples where corporate and governmental reliance on AI has resulted in perverse, even cruel, decisions, the book criticises those who are more reverential on the topic for placing AI on a pedestal above the status of humans and human judgement. It draws attention to the scope for over-reliance on flawed AI systems, for example in the production of lethal AI-controlled weapons, where machines learn, with underlying prejudices, who should be killed and who should be spared.

Introducing the line of questioning indicated by the title, it is pointed out that survey analysis suggests bias and discrimination against those of non-European heritage, and against females relative to males.

Going into some depth on the Hegelian problem of basing decisions about the future solely on aggregated past patterns, Adib-Moghaddam sets out how AI can hinder social reform. For example,

predicting which inmates in a prison are more likely to reoffend, and basing parole decisions on AI analysis of aggregated data, raises all sorts of questions about correlation and causation, confirmation bias, and 'human learning' to game the system.

On a more basic level, the book cites error rate of 5% to 50% in AI based facial recognition/identity systems; high error rates which have led to wrongful arrests, blacklisting, stop-and-search, rejected job applications and many other injustices, with error rates in the higher categories for people of darker complexion or non-European heritage.

The book discusses AI and its deployment in social media analytics where individuals' political views, sexual orientation, religion, tendency to commit terrorist acts or other criminal acts and creditworthiness are recorded in secret corporate or governmental databases, which are then accessed by other AI systems; all without redress in the case of very frequent errors (and indeed privacy invasions). This is in effect an argument against reverence and even deference to AI.

Using historical examples, the book poses the question of where the disrupters of the future are going to come from if algorithms contain within them an orthodox intolerant of outliers, based on over-aggregated data. In doing so, Adib-Moghaddam points to the scope not only for narrative monopolisation and 'correct science', but for anti-pluralist institutional monopolisation via alliances between big tech, governments, monopolised international finance (also funding academia), and concentration of media control.

Adib-Moghaddam refers to the rise of eugenics in the first quarter of the 20th century, as a 'respectable' science, and how it contributed to the rise of National Socialism in the 1930s. However it is suggested that eugenics and its modern equivalents, have deeper roots in 300 years of European supremacist attitudes and the colonialism and international capitalism it inspired, now embedded in AI algorithms.

The book explores in an admirably accessible way issues around how 'intelligent' is AI.

For example, a distinction is suggested between a) actual interactive intelligence, which includes things like recognition of emotions expressed in human facial movements as well as computational capacity, b) mere symptoms of intelligence like apparent deductive reasoning, c) the nature of the machine learning part of AI and how close to or better than human learning it is, and d) the nature of sentience or quasi-sentience; whether claimed by the AI system ("I am sentient") or by the application by humans of sentience criteria 'tests'.

Suggesting such distinctions, even though more implied than stated starkly, usefully helps the reader to grasp the complexity of AI programs, and the limitations of AI.

In this context Adib-Moghaddam discusses the contrast between moral judgements made by AI systems and their polarisation effects (ie via complex social media content algorithms).

The point made is that racism and sexism are rooted in notions of 'the other'; persons of a different culture, religion, nationality, tribe, sexual orientation and so on. These are portrayed as emotions through which confirmation bias attaches in social media, and polarisation results - in accelerated politically-encouraged division. National Socialism and Hitler are referenced, but one might also think of Hutus and Tutsies in Rwanda, Pol Pot's genocidal war on the middle classes, or even increasingly Muslims in Modi's India.

Polarising social media algorithms might be considered immoral, in contrast to Big Tech's focus on adding variables and improving machine learning in order to convince the public that AI can be trusted not to make immoral judgements on, for example, the logical necessity of using lethal force which would not be justified if used by a human. This contrast is made in criticism of Big Tech.

In conclusion the book appears to come down on the side of the net benefits of increasingly complex AI systems, but argues for international rules to address design problems which result in polarisation, racism, sexism, immoral AI judgements, and other issues, drawing parallels with the regulation of other technologies

such as gene editing and advanced biotechnologies. Indirectly, the author appears to view regulatory development as the key route to address AI errors (eg facial recognition errors).

In sum, the book uses absorbing reference points and historical parallels to shed light on the AI controversies of the day, and gain a better understanding of the polemics.

It is written largely in lay terms, which is helpful. Those looking for a single-minded logical argument, building to a clear conclusion, might find the indirect style a little frustrating. One might wonder if the blurred stratigraphy, in contrast to the media-friendly book title, are deliberately designed to make it clear that the book was not written by an AI system.

Paul Reynolds

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## **Yemen in Crisis, Devastating Conflict, Fragile Hope by Helen Lackner SAQI Books**

## **Bread and Henna: My time with the women of a Yemeni mountain town by lanthe Mary Maclagan Bradt Travel Guides**

Yemen is a land of stark contradictions. Despite its deep tribal roots, it is predominantly associated with conflict, instability, terrorism, a pervasive humanitarian crisis and often perceived as a war-torn nation.

Yet, it boasts a diverse and distinctive cultural heritage, standing as one of the oldest sites of civilisation on the Arabian Peninsula. Yemen's unique architecture, culture, history and strategic significance on both regional and global scales, along with its uprising in 2011, add further layers to its complexity.

Two recent books, authored by women who are also social anthropologists, offer contrasting perspectives on Yemen. In *Yemen in Crisis* Helen Lackner delves into the country's geopolitical and socio-economic landscape through accessible thematic chapters

demonstrating deep, knowledgeable and insightful analysis.

Particularly outstanding are the chapters on political Islam, tribalism and the changing nature of Yemeni society. With five decades of research on Yemen under her belt, Lackner is considered the foremost authority on Yemeni politics. Her work offers valuable insights for readers of all knowledge levels, shedding light on critical events such as the 2011 uprising and the subsequent civil war and humanitarian crisis as well as her assessments of the country's future prospects.

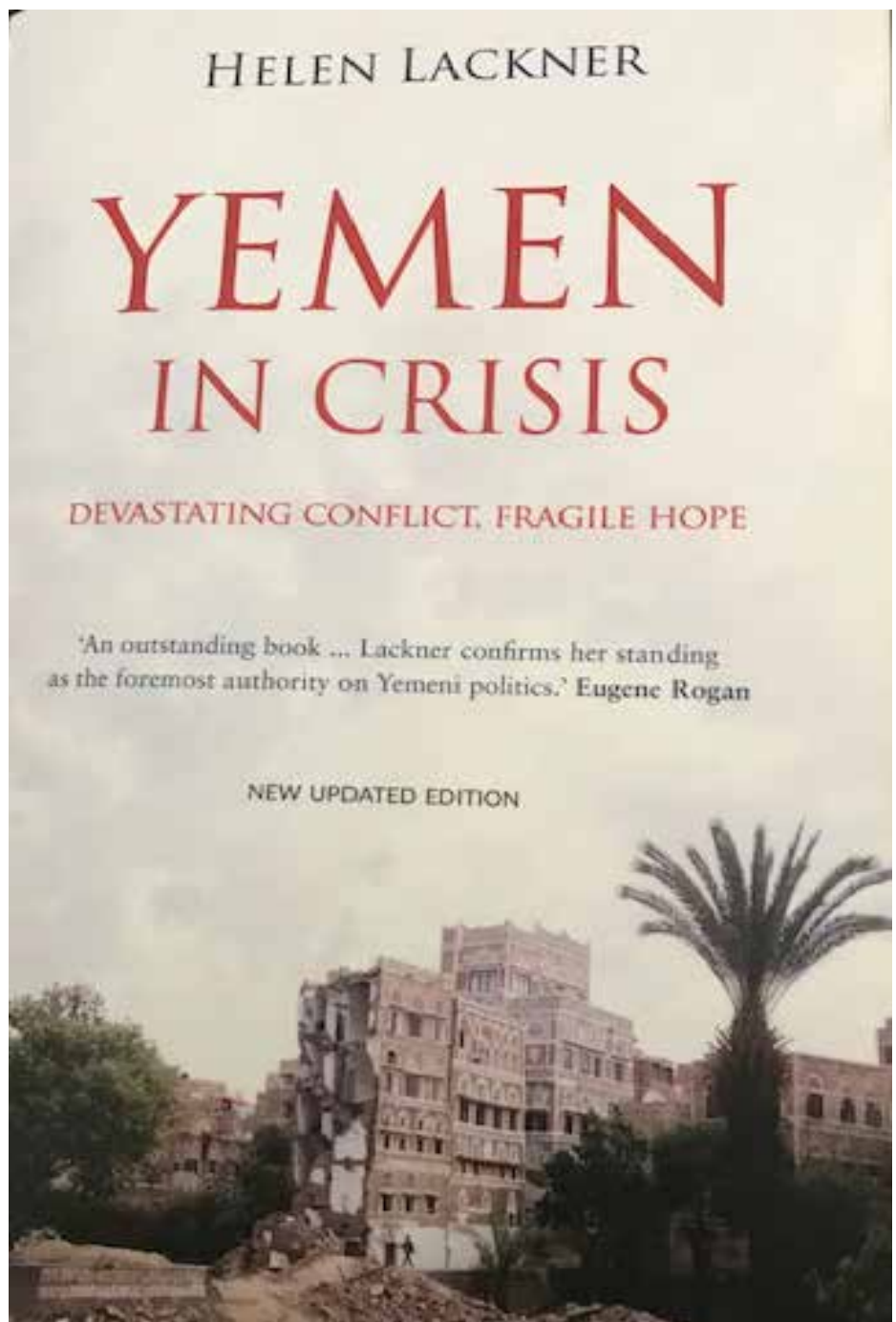
Ianthe Mary Maclagan's *Bread and Henna* offers a different lens. During her fieldwork for her PhD in the 1980s, Maclagan immersed herself in the daily lives of women in a small mountainous town in western Yemen.

She vividly portrays the intricacies of their lives, from marriages, raising children and domestic work, all while socialising, sharing meals, and chewing qat during leisurely afternoons. Filled with rich details, her work is a beautifully observed and utterly captivating account.

The characters, power dynamics and relationships among these women shine through the pages, providing a poignant glimpse into a society that may have evolved significantly since. At the end of the book, I missed those women – a testament to the authors ability to draw readers into the lives of the people she portrays.

Both diverse perspectives offer the opportunity to explore the many faces of Yemen – although sadly without the ability to explore the country in person. The nation's resilience, enduring geopolitical and cultural significance, and ability to adapt to change become apparent when seen through both the macroscopic lens of geopolitics and the intimate stories of its people. Yemen remains a compelling subject for exploration, inviting readers and academics alike to engage with its complex narrative and appreciate the richness and diversity it embodies.

Susan Simmonds



Continued from Page 21...

Gabon is a cousin of the deposed Bongo dynasty), they will have few ways to protest, adding to the jihadists' appeal.

A glimmer of hope is offered by Cote d'Ivoire, where the government has successfully invested in economic development and social programmes to alleviate poverty in areas targeted by jihadists. Significantly, France keeps a low profile in Cote d'Ivoire, funding the well-regarded International Academy for the Fight Against Terrorism.

The West should learn from Cote d'Ivoire's approach. It should offer technical expertise, funding human development projects, helping establish manufacturing to process natural resources, and building institutions. Instead of cutting the BBC World Service and British Council, the UK should recognise they are effective ways to counter Russian disinformation. Otherwise, there will continue to be coups across Africa because the West, including the French, have not focused on helping countries create systems and institutions responding to people's needs.

Rebecca Tinsley is director of Waging Peace

## Monday

I find myself increasingly worried about right-wing comment journalists, who can only be described as unhappy, unskilled and unmoored. Flabby chested public-school types to a man, their eyes hollow from reading think-tank reports and self-abuse, what they need is fresh air, exercise and some good, old fashioned hard work. As we can supply all three of these here on my estate, I have determined to act. With the help of Freddie and Fiona, I have drawn up a list of recruits for my 'Great Rutland National Service'. The next step is to have them scrobbled as they leave their favourite fashionable restaurants and brought here in an unmarked charabanc. I have no doubt that a regime of farm work, unarmed combat and cold showers will make them happy and skilled in no time. As to being moored, I shall ensure that they are securely tied up at night.

## Tuesday

The Glorious Twelfth? I don't find it glorious at all. Shooting grouse is like shooting fish in a barrel, only without the outside risk of drowning. Give me instead the open moors of my native county and our own Rutland partridge. Fire on that doughty bird and it will take cover and fire back. Now that's what I call good sport!

## Wednesday

It's time someone did something about the Gibb brothers. First there was Robbie Gibb, a bigwig at the BBC who has been using his role there to further Conservative interests at every turn. It is he who is responsible for the replacement of Gary Lineker as host of Match of the Day by Jacob Rees-Mogg and for such programmes as 'Have a Go with Thérèse Coffey' and 'Gove Island'. Now another Gibb has surfaced: Nick Gibb, who it appears has been building schools out of an inferior sort of concrete. It won't affect us here, as I had the village school built with best Hornsey featherstone, but it's causing no end of a problem up and down the country, with taller pupils having to take it in turns to hold up the roof. The only thing I will say in defence of the Gibb brothers is that their music for Saturday Night Fever was very good. Perhaps you know it? 'Night fever rumpty-tum Night fever' – that's how it goes.

## Thursday

Dinner with Freddie and Fiona. I arrive at their top-floor flat to find they have no cook, nor even a kitchen. Instead, I am handed a bundle of menus that encompasses every cuisine you can imagine (though I note there is no Rutland takeaway in this fashionable quarter of London – do I sniff a business opportunity?) I make my choice – a Norman Lamb dhansak with naan bread – and then my hosts telephone the restaurant to arrange its delivery by fast bicycle. "A lot of older people are bringing orders these days," says Freddie, and it does indeed take a little longer for my meal to arrive than I would wish. "There's no way we can give you more than three stars," Fiona tells the courier, who is grey haired and, it has to be said, rather grey in the face. Something about him seems familiar, and then I remember: he was a Liberal Democrat MP in Cornwall before the debacle of 2015. As he leaves, I slip him the number of the Home for Distressed Canvassers in Herne Bay, where a number of his former colleagues are seeing out their days in comfort.

# Lord Bonkers' Diary

## Friday

A researcher arrives at the Hall to quiz me about Violent Bonham Carter and the days when criminal gangs ran London. We cover the familiar ground of the murder Jack 'The Hat' McVitie (heir to the biscuit fortune), the many jewel robberies 'up the Garden' and the kidnapping of Dame Anna Neagle. Taking a shine to the young fellow, I let slip something that is not, I believe, generally known: those explosions in the Fifties that the authorities

blamed on Isle of, Wight Separatists were really the work of Violent's gang, concerned that other firms were "getting lairy". The researcher concludes by asking me a thoroughly modern question: what gender was Violent? I picture Violent in twin-set and pearls with three days' stubble hiding the razor scars and say firmly: "You didn't argue with Violent. Violent Bonham Carter was whatever gender Violent Bonham Carter said Violent Bonham Carter was."

## Saturday

I first met Jo Grimond during the 1950 general election campaign. He proved a charming companion, and as we made inroads into a bottle of Auld Johnston, that most prized of Highland malts, he laid out his plans to me. "Britain needs a strong Liberal Party, yet it's practically impossible to get elected in our colours these days. So I've decided to invent a constituency and just turn up at Westminster after the election with all the new MPs. I've dreamt up two groups of islands off the North coast of Scotland – call them Orkney and Shetland – as I don't suppose anyone at Westminster will have been sea bathing at Thurso. Besides, my father fagged for the Serjeant at Arms, so there won't be any awkward questions." And his plan worked better than I had imagined possible. Over the years he got rather carried away with inventing new features in his constituency – ancient stone circles, a Viking cathedral, a Nissan hut turned into a gem of a chapel by an Italian prisoner of war – but no one smelled a rat. When the time came for Grimond to stand down, we agreed that the scheme was too clever to be allowed to die, so first Jim Wallace and then Alistair Carmichael were let into the secret. From time to time, I come across maps in our party's policy documents or on membership cards that leave off Shetland or even Orkney, and have to make urgent phone calls to get them made consistent with our story. I say, it's a good thing there's a lock on this diary!

## Sunday

Who should I spy on the lawn at breakfast but my old friend Ruttie, the Rutland Water Monster? Between you and me, I think she is getting jealous of all the attention being paid to Loch Ness. The next thing we know, she'll be waddling across the Oakham road and pulling faces at the motorists to get in the papers herself. Later I call at my Home for Well-Behaved Orphans as they are having a film show. The little inmates have voted amongst themselves to decide the main feature and chosen The Colditz Story.

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