

# liberator



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🔥 Mid Beds and a lesson from Poland - Michael Meadowcroft

🔥 How to get back into Europe - Nick Harvey

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## LIBERATOR

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# COMMENTARY

## A WALL BEYOND CONTROL

Liberator's cover shows the four recent Liberal Democrat by-election winners forced to participate in an embarrassing stunt at conference in which they demolished a 'blue wall' for a photo-opportunity.

Quite apart from these blue cardboard bricks having done duty several times before - such that the stunt was not much of a novelty - it highlighted the party's emphasis on the 'blue wall' and so in turn what is going wrong with this strategy

The problem is not targeting Tory-held seats in itself. Since there is only a handful of serious of Lib Dem versus Labour contests it clearly make sense to concentrate campaigning effort and money on winnable Tory held seats.

What is a problem is campaigning on more or less nothing except a message of "we can beat the Tories".

While this is no doubt true in many places it relies for motivating voters on the Tories continuing to be an embarrassing and repellent shambles.

It does not give voters much positive reason to support the Lib Dems, especially as the party's other main campaign theme - on the NHS - is hard for all but the most closely interested to distinguish from Labour's.

So far the message "the Tories are rubbish and we are best placed to beat them" has delivered four by-election gains and some impressive local election results.

What it has manifestly not done is shift the party's position in the national polls, which hovers only a short way above that of the Greens and the almost invisible Reform.

It will no doubt be argued that this does not matter so long as votes pile up in the right places, but it does matter longer term if the party is reduced to functioning effectively in only a few dozen constituencies.

More immediately, a strategy that depends on Tory disunity, cruelty and ineptitude is not one that is within the Lib Dems' control.

The Lib Dems also cannot be certain that the Tories will continue along the self-destructive path of the last three years.

Suppose it entered the Tories' heads that they would like to win again and the best way to do that is to present a less extreme and divided face to voters? How then does the "we're not the Tories, so vote for us" message sound?

The returning David Cameron is unpopular among Lib Dems for the way the Coalition was conducted and for calling the disastrous 2016 referendum. He does though look almost reassuringly normal set alongside

most of the cabinet. Along with prime minister Rishi Sunak's decision to sack loudmouthed fanatics like Suella Braverman one could see glimmerings that the Tories might try presenting a more palatable face to voters. What then should the Lib Dems offer voters who might think of switching?

## IN TWO STATES

Almost unnoticed amid Labour's ructions, all 15 Lib Dem MPs voted for the SNP's amendment for a ceasefire in Gaza.

This saw the party come off a rather shaky fence, mounted after Hamas's murderous terror assault and then the Israeli bombing of Gaza, but was done in an oddly low profile way without so much as a post on Lib Dem Voice to explain what had been done and why.

There was though an email to party members from foreign affairs spokesperson Layla Moran a few days before, which explained the Lib Dems wanted "an immediate bilateral ceasefire, to achieve a political solution", not one that froze the conflict.

Moran said the party supported a two-state solution, "because only a lasting peace can deliver the security which both Palestinians and Israelis deserve".

Diplomatic experts have grappled for decades with how a viable two-state solution could be constructed and it seems improbable the Lib Dems have suddenly found a solution that eluded everyone else.

The problem is that a two state solution only works if both states are viable and that cannot happen so long as the West Bank resembles a Swiss cheese festooned with Israeli settlements.

It might be possible to draw an untidy boundary that would put settlements closest to Israel on the Israeli side while leaving other settlements to be evacuated or have their inhabitants living under Palestinian rule.

Neither side would like those consequences, but those are the sorts of prices that have to be paid for solving intractable conflicts.

Claims from some Israelis that they enjoy divine authority to settle the West Bank, and from some Palestinians that Israel should be destroyed, are plainly both the sorts of obstacles that extremists will always put in the way of peace agreements.

These things are never easy - as Northern Ireland has shown - as they boil down to prizing apart two groups each of whom wants the same land.

But since the Lib Dems have now declared for a ceasefire and two states, they must also follow the logic of encouraging two viable, separate and peaceful states. The party's influence on the ground is about nil but it still has to answer "well, what would you do?"

# RADICAL BULLETIN

## HOW NOT TO DO IT

It's never a sign of strength when a party leader blows a gasket and reacts with rudeness to criticism, and especially not, as in the case of Ed Davey, when that criticism about the party's timidity and lack of profile came - just as *Liberator* went to press - from 30 well-known party figures in a letter to the Guardian [<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/nov/29/as-liberal-democrats-we-must-set-out-a-bold-and-distinctive-offer-to-voters>]

Signatories ranged from *Liberator's* David Grace and Social Liberal Forum council members to less usual suspects such as Gavin Grant - normally a pillar of the party establishment - and Ed Lucas, PPS for City of London and Westminster South.

Davey's spokesperson responded: "It would be a comforting luxury to act as the most democratic thinktank in British politics and navel-gaze amongst ourselves." Davey then sacked Baroness Ludford as Lords Europe spokesperson for signing the letter and neglected to immediately replace her.

The letter stated: "We have bolder policies than Labour on the environment, fair votes and human rights, but we are not communicating them. At a general election, echoing Labour's general antipathy to the Tories through local campaigns is part of the battle but insufficient on its own.

"Only a statement of confident liberalism - on Europe, the environment, political reform and public services - will show people that the Lib Dems are a national force worth supporting. We do well when we have a principled message that cuts through, such as our current one on Gaza."

An evidently widely held view in the party. If Davey is so thin skinned that he - by all accounts - spent six minutes at Federal Policy Committee the next night and insulted signatories, then all is not well.

## ROUND THE HOUSES

One has to go back decades for anything to rival the defeat inflicted on the party establishment by the Young Liberals in the housing debate at Bournemouth.

This turned on whether the party should continue to promote a national home building target or - only two years after adopting this - abandon it in favour of a local targets system.

As it turned out the spectacular wrongheadedness of the party establishment's position was shown two weeks later when Labour committed itself to a similar national target. Headlines about 'Lib Dems drop housing target as Labour adopts one' would have been deeply damaging.

The YLs' argument was essentially that having a housing target sent a message to those in need of

homes that the party took the subject seriously, and that it would be bad politics to drop this in favour of a local system which - whatever its merits - was so complicated that no one who spoke in its support in the debate could explain it.

As several people pointed out, once a party has got itself into a position where it has to explain things in detail to voters it has already lost the argument.

The party establishment called upon what it imagined to be its big guns, only to find the YLs had some bigger ones.

Former leader Tim Farron made a speech that was no doubt intended to be impassioned but came across as faintly deranged as he raved about the YLs being "Thatcherite" and having put forward "the most right wing thing I've seen at conference".

He was slapped down by London mayoral candidate Rob Blackie who said: "Tim Farron, that speech was below you, you are better than that."

The last Coalition-era Lib Dem housing minister Stephen Williams spoke on the YLs' side for keeping the national target, as did Chelmsford leader Stephen Robinson, who pointed out that since the commitments in the housing policy paper roughly added up to the national target anyway, it seemed pointless not to tell anyone.

Voting in the hall was not even close, with the YL amendment carrying by a substantial majority.

The party leadership's handling of the entire thing was maladroit. Why did it want to court embarrassment over something it was incapable of explaining to its own members, never mind the public?

Those with very long memories will recall David Steel's habit of announcing that the party leadership would be appallingly humiliated if the Liberal Assembly voted a particular way, and then wondering why he was reported as having been appallingly humiliated when it duly did so, whereas if he'd kept quiet the whole thing would probably have gone unnoticed. This was straight out of his playbook.

## WHOSE BRAINWAVE WAS THAT?

The party establishment's hysterical response to the possibility of the YLs defeating it over housing targets was such that parliamentary staff were seen dishing out leaflets to conference representatives couched in the most lurid terms, claiming that sticking to a policy of a national housing target would be "politically suicidal" and a "developers charter".

One would hardly have guessed that the YLs sought to uphold a policy agreed by the leadership without a qualm only two years earlier.

The leaflets were glossy and full colour and lacked any imprint. One did though contain what some took to be an anti-Semitic cartoon, even though it was no

doubt not intended as such.

This depicted a 'developer' with a vast nose, long beard, devil's horns and a large swag bag with a £ sign on it.

Who was responsible for this? Perhaps those who claim to be in supreme control of parliamentary communications could throw some light upon this unfortunate episode?

## ALL AT C

People do not normally look to Ed Davey as a source of mildly rude jokes. He is not the sort of politician to suddenly break off mid-speech and say: "Have you heard the one about the armadillo and the cormorant?" (Don't ask).

But he essayed such a joke in his conference speech by 'apologising' to clowns for having earlier called to "get these clowns" out of Downing Street. He then added: "I used the wrong C-word."

This went down poorly with a number of female parliamentarians who - while not exactly reaching for smelling salts - considered the reference offensive and vulgar and one that Davey's team may have thought was a good joke in private but which should never have made it into both written and oral versions of the speech.

Chief of staff Rhiannon Leaman, leader's political advisor Jonathan Jones and communications head Baroness Greener are widely thought to be the only people to whom Davey really listens, so was one of them responsible?

There is concern in particular among peers - who have less routine access to him than MPs - that Davey has done what all leaders eventually do and vanished into a bunker where outsiders are kept firmly outside and he hears only from an echo chamber.

Davey meanwhile had troubles with another kind of sea, when he went kayaking on the Dorset coast with chief whip Wendy Chamberlain to highlight the campaign against sewage in coastal waters.

Both seemed quite skilled with their paddles until at the end Eastbourne candidate Josh Barbarinde playfully tipped them out of their kayak, causing Davey and Chamberlain to fall into the sea in an undignified manner. It looked as though Barbarinde was attempting the world's first political assassination by drowning.

## BERKSHIRE BUNFIGHT

A row over the candidate selection for the new Reading West & Mid Berkshire constituency has embarrassingly spilled into the local press there and brought the peculiarities of Lib Dem selection rules to light.

Local council cabinet member Adrian Abbs won the selection, but this was challenged on the grounds that he published endorsements from local notables, which is not allowed.

The selection was thus awarded to runner-up Helen Belcher. Abbs has said she implied at the hustings that were she selected party HQ would be particularly enthusiastic about giving support to the local party, and Abbs claimed this too amounted to an implied endorsement.

Local news website Penny Post quoted a statement from Lib Dem party president Mark Pack that said: "All our selections have an outside returning officer

and an independent appeals process, and I'm confident that this provides a robust and fair framework for any complaints to be considered."

The upshot is Abbs has left the party and resigned from the council cabinet and Belcher is installed as candidate despite coming second in the originally ballot.

Such disputes rarely end well if local members think headquarters has meddled with their choice of candidate.

## NOT DRESSED LIKE THAT

Although the party constitution says none should be enslaved by conformity that message appeared not to have reached conference venue staff when a group of people in elaborate Trinidadian carnival costumes turned up.

These were not, as *Liberator* was initially told, a group of naked dancers, but they may have been under-dressed compared with most party representatives.

It turned out that the Liberal Democrat Campaign for Race Equality had reacted to the ban on leaflet distribution in the venue by inviting a group of people whom it had recruited to the party at summer roadshows to come to conference dressed in full Caribbean carnival finery.

The idea was that a large group of people thus attired would draw representatives' attention and they could then talk about LDCRE's work.

Sadly this exercise in using human leaflets failed as staff objected to the presence of giant headdresses and other exotic impedimenta in the venue.

## BAPTISM OF FIRE

One does not normally expect acts of violence at meetings of the Liberal Democrat Christian Forum, and especially not when the announced theme is how to 'disagree well'.

Liberal Voice for Women's Juliet Line tried to raise a point about a dispute in which she said abusive language had been used.

Fringe meeting chair Chris Adams interrupted to say that it had been agreed prior to Line's arrival that the meeting would not discuss specific cases.

After the meeting, a woman whom Line had never met before approached her to speak about the case and they were joined by Adams, who said that on reflection he had misjudged things and apologised as he felt he should have let Line speak. At this point the unknown women emptied a glass of water over Adams' head. Some Christians may be in favour of immersive baptisms but surely not in such circumstances.

## SOMETHING IN THE AIR

Conference passes used to be laminated and so fairly impervious to damage, but this year they were printed on some cheap variety of paper that was prone to cause photographs of the wearer to disintegrate.

One *Liberator* reader was challenged by security staff as her picture looked as though she had recently been irradiated, and was sent to get a replacement taken.

The explanation given was that the paper used did not react well to sea air. The conference was held in, er, a venue above the English Channel.

## ALL OF ONE MIND

The conference debate on the Lib Dem pre-manifesto had no speaker called against the motion - not even someone who wanted to use this device to argue for more emphasis on some specific point.

Surely someone would have wanted to make a point about this document's blandness and caution (Liberator 419) although whether they would have been called to disrupt the warm glow of unanimity is another matter.

There was though a frisson at the debate's start where Liberator's David Grace sought to suspend standing orders to have an amendment taken to make an explicit reference to rejoining the European Union.

Since this laudable objective was in the actual pre-manifesto document there appeared no reason to omit it from the motion.

But Federal Conference Committee - no doubt under the cosh from on high - twice refused to take it.

Grace won the right to a mini debate on whether to suspend standing orders but chair Nick da Costa ruled he failed to get the required two-thirds majority for the actual suspension. No doubt purely for reasons of time da Costa also refused a counted vote.

## THREE'S A CROWD

When the party changed its transphobia definition on the basis of legal advice from KCs Guy Vassall Adams and Karon Monaghan (Liberator 415), to reflect a tribunal ruling known as the Forstatter judgement, some trans rights campaigners felt the Lib Dems had got things wrong.

It now appears that the party has paid for a third set of advice, given by a barrister nominated by members of the Lib Dem LGBT+ group. This though despite some nuances is understood to say in terms the same as the first two sets of advice, that gender critical beliefs are legally protected.

This may explain why this third set of advice has had a very limited circulation, is not yet known to have been put to the Federal Board and why nothing appears to have changed as a result of its receipt.

## SEEING JUSTICE DONE?

Since the 2017 general election there have been four prime ministers, Brexit and a pandemic and still the case of former Lib Dem MP David Ward remains in limbo (Liberator 414 and other too numerous to mention).

Ward was MP for Bradford East from 2010-15 when he lost his seat. He was re-adopted in 2017 but was removed as candidate by then leader Tim Farron for reasons that have never been clearly explained but which followed an allegation from the Conservative MP Eric Pickles that Ward had made an anti-Semitic remark.

Since Pickles is not normally cited as an objective authority on the utterances of Lib Dem candidates, Farron should have made it clear what he objected to, but never did.

Ward had his membership revoked and stood as an independent in Bradford East in 2017 beating an official Lib Dem paper candidate (Liberator 395) though Labour retained the seat.

He later sat in a joint group of Lib Dems and independents for a while on Bradford council but eventually lost his seat.

Ward's supporters accept that standing against an official candidate is a sacking offence but argue that he should be readmitted because of a decades-long record of service to the party and because there is now has a policy of allowing applications for readmission after three years.

A letter sent to the English Lib Dems by the former MP Michael Meadowcroft in support of Ward's readmission, noted: "David has subsequently been cleared of all anti-Semitism charges by the BBC and the Bradford Met Borough Council. It is acknowledged by the Liberal Democrats that his sacking as candidate was not on anti-Semitism charges. No such charge is extant and the then Candidates' Officer has stated that David is not regarded as being anti-Semitic."

The English party though maintained that Ward had - and might again - bring the party into disrepute and rejected his fourth attempt to rejoin.

Another letter of support said Ward had spent long stays both with a family in Israel and on visits to Gaza."and had considerable sympathy and empathy with the Jews whom he knew and the Palestinians. There was not a scintilla of anti-Semitism in anything he said". He had though been an outspoken critic of Israel's prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Ward is now understood to have been told that although the party does not think he is anti-Semitic, it thinks unspecified other people might think he is, so does not want him back

Meanwhile, the Lib Dem local party in Bradford continues to be in poor shape in part because of what one local activist called "the HQ destructive persecution of the local party with regard to David".

## STARTER FOR 10

Questions to party committees at conference used to be a rather obscure corner of the proceedings where anorakish points or personal grievances were pursued.

They have recently though become a sort of proxy war battleground between trans activists and gender critical supporters, with each asking various party committees what will be done to protect them from the other.

Only a short time is allowed for questions and faced with several dozen all asking essentially the same thing the Federal Conference Committee used its powers to composite them.

Most were still not reached orally and will supposedly be answered in writing; these tend to appear unannounced many months later in the depths of the party website, where they are safe from any supplementary questions. This also means that the parts of original questions excised in the compositing process never get answered at all.

# FOUR DAYS GOOD

## What is the Government scared of in Lib Dem South Cambridgeshire's trial of four-day working, wonders Bridget Smith

The Government has called on Local Authorities to innovate and that is exactly what we're doing in South Cambridgeshire but it appears to be the wrong sort of innovation if you are a Tory. They have gone so far as issuing a Best Value Notice when our corporate peer review has just reported that we have really sound finances and an enviable record of delivering on the Government's priorities.

In more 'advanced' parts of the world such as Scandinavia and Australia the four-day working week is becoming the norm and in the UK over 90% of those private sector businesses in a recent large scale study found it hugely beneficial and have chosen to stick with it.

The five-day week is over 100 years old and was undoubtedly fit for purpose in a world without internet, AI and remote working. The pandemic accelerated the move into this new world of work and most organisations have retained those practices because they worked for people and for business. Despite Jacob Rees Mogg wanting all civil servants tied to their desks five days a week, eight hours a day that is certainly not what is actually happening in government and it is not happening elsewhere.

So why did we put ourselves in the firing line in South Cambridgeshire and why have we chosen, thus far, to stay there?

There is a national crisis in recruitment and retention which is most acute in the public sector and especially acute in places like ours where it is extremely expensive to live and there is a very competitive market for the sort of talented people we need. Greater Cambridge (Cambridge City and South Cambridgeshire) is the hottest growth area in the UK and it is nigh on impossible to compete on salaries and perks with the wealthy private sector for planners, IT experts and others.

We had tried everything we could for years to become an employer of choice but we had to look at something else, not only to attract people but to hold onto them. We routinely failed to fill 80% of vacancies and early last year only filled 50%; some very attractive jobs received no applications and we were spending more than £2m a year on agency staff.

We began by running an initial three-months' trial just to test if performance held up. We had previously spent three months preparing for the trial because evidence from the private sector study indicated the strong link between good preparation and eventual success. We extended the trial to a year when the result were encouraging and have subsequently seen an escalation of benefits as we move towards the end of this longer trial early next spring.

Despite this still being a trial we have recruited

into 13 notoriously hard to fill roles and expect to spend hundreds of thousands of pounds less this year on agency staff than predicted. Our performance has held up across the board and has improved in places. We are getting significantly more and higher calibre applicants for every job than in the past. Staff sickness is down, people are returning to work earlier when they are sick and turnover is much reduced. The number of staff considering moving on is down too. The transformation work we had been struggling to implement with a tired and stressed workforce has been turbo-charged.

What is really important to me as a Liberal is how do the staff feel – what are the benefits to health and well-being because it is not rocket science to assume that happy, unstressed, well rested people are more productive. Because we know that this is far from the top of the Tory list of priorities we do not make a song and dance about it, but our health and wellbeing data has shown improvements way above what we even hoped for. The culture in our organisation is great, our colleagues know how much we care about them and appreciate the position we have taken.

And what about the government's sorry role? Why are they choosing to interfere in an operational matter in a little local authority rather than trusting the electorate to decide at the ballot box if we are doing a good job or not? Why are they wasting time and resource attacking us and risking a massive backlash from the sector as a whole?

Why, when they have their eyes on turning our area into the UK's Silicon Valley would they halt progress and reduce our capacity to deliver on their visions for the Cambridge economy? I have no doubt that they are cross that we have not immediately done as we were told but we believe we are on the side of right. We can clearly show that we have been doing is exactly what Michael Gove called on us to do, we are innovating to deliver better services whilst improving the value for our residents' money.

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Bridget Smith is the Liberal Democrat leader of South Cambridgeshire District Council

# HYPOCRISY REIGNS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

## Rebecca Tinsley wonders why mass killings in Sudan lack the attention focused on Gaza

It is rare that the leaders of the global East, West, North and South act in harmony. Yet, the Israel-Hamas conflict has produced a rare phenomenon: a display of shared hypocrisy.

For instance, presidents, princes, and prime ministers of Muslim-majority nations have been silent about the persecution of millions of Muslim Uighurs in China, the Muslim Rohingya in Myanmar, 200 million Muslims marginalised by the Hindu nationalist Indian government, and the slaughter of thousands of Muslim civilians in Yemen.

Yet these same leaders now find their voices in condemning Israel on a regular basis and particularly loudly since 7 October when the latest horror erupted in the Holy Land.

Students and professors at Western universities who gave little thought to the persecuted minorities mentioned above, or the estimated 500,000 civilian deaths in the Tigray region of Ethiopia in 2022, are now demonstrating about the appalling and pointless suffering in Gaza.

### SILENT ELITE

The African elite which was silent throughout the Rwandan genocide remains unmoved by the recent surge in violence in the Sahel, the destitution of its own citizens, millions of people dead in the Congo, or climate change. Yet, it is suddenly animated in standing up for the Palestinians.

Meanwhile, Western leaders who claim to defend vaguely articulated “international humanitarian law” (the Geneva conventions, presumably) and human rights norms have tied themselves in pretzel-like knots, embracing Israel after Hamas’s slaughter of 1,700 Israeli civilians, and then squirming in discomfort as Israel responds with disproportionate force in Gaza.

(Those with long memories will recall that, for the West, a Bosnian Muslim life was not worth the same as a Christian Ukrainian one, and neither wretched, pulverised nationality deserves the attention given to the tragic disappearance of Madeleine McCann in Portugal).

During the Syrian civil war, three million Muslim refugees fled to Turkey, where they remain, their lives in limbo, while 660,000 are still in miserable conditions in Jordan. Saudi Arabia has a million large, luxurious tents in storage for use during the annual haj. Yet, the vast, empty, wealthy kingdom eventually and reluctantly accepted only 500,000 Syrian refugees. Saudi’s current expressions of anger at the fate of the Palestinians are purely performative, in common with so many other Muslim leaders. Over the years, corrupt, incompetent and brutal Arab and Muslim leaders have leveraged the plight of the Palestinians to distract their own disgruntled citizens and subjects

when they become restless.

Some lives matter less than others. This selective outrage is hard to bear if you happen to be in a persecuted minority fighting for survival away from media attention. It is also bewildering if you are a citizen of Sudan, where a nation of 45 million people is on the point of collapse, thanks to two battling groups of warlords with guns, intent on control of the country’s resources.

The moment the last white person was evacuated from Khartoum in April 2023, when war began, almost all international coverage of the conflict ceased. Since then, the ethnic cleansing and murder of Black African Sudanese in Darfur by Arab Sudanese has been worse than it was during the Darfur Genocide (2003-05).

Mass graves, systematic rape, the destruction of food and water sources, bodies used as speed bumps, the looting of hospitals and the emptying of entire towns goes unreported.

French troops are stationed in Chad, 26 kilometres from El Geneina, a city of half a million Darfuris where it is thought 10,000 Black Africans have been killed, yet there was no suggestion the French might bring humanitarian aid, let alone scare off the marauding Arab paramilitaries (who would run away at the first sight of a professional army).

Khartoum, a city of six million people, is being destroyed as the Sudanese Army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF, the rebranded Janjaweed who committed genocide in Darfur) slug it out. Both are ethnically Arab and Muslim, although these terms are almost meaningless because of centuries of intermarriage with Sudan’s Black African groups. Identity and prejudice are in the eye of the beholder.

Both military entities have much in common: they want to prevent civilians ruling Sudan, they both wish to avoid responsibility at the ICC where some of their members are indicted for genocide in Darfur in the 2000s, and they both control massive financial networks based on corruption and ripping off the nation’s resources.

Both also register their commercial assets in the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, as yet untouched by Western sanctions.

In a typical Khartoum street of 50 homes, only four are now left habitable. The army bombs indiscriminately, while the RSF fights neighbourhood by neighbourhood, seizing hostages, stealing their possessions, killing and raping. At least seven million Sudanese have fled so far, and those with money have made the hazardous journey to neighbouring countries. Those civilians who have stayed in Khartoum have established a remarkable nexus of resistance committees, performing basic surgery in people’s living rooms, and distributing aid to those in need.

Who has geopolitical importance? The argument goes



that Sudan doesn't matter, whereas the Middle East is geopolitically strategic. Hence the scramble by Biden, the EU, and self-important politicians like Sunak and Starmer to embrace Israel (although no one in the Middle East cares what Britain thinks).

At the same time, there is a chorus of denunciation of "the Zionist entity" by Arab rulers who were quietly mending fences with Netanyahu in an effort to isolate Iran. The Middle East is strategically important because of oil, the menace of Iran, the vulnerability of the Suez Canal through which massive amounts of the world's trade sails, and the possibility that oil-rich Gulf Arabs might start buying all their weapons from Russia, China and Turkey, and stop purchasing them from the US, UK and France (and cease laundering their money in the West, of course).

## **SUEZ BLOCKADE**

Yet, Sudan also has geopolitical importance: it allowed the Russians to build a military base at Port Sudan, from which Putin could blockade the Suez Canal, if he chose to. Imagine a scenario in which China was menacing or even invading Taiwan. The US and other Western powers might blockade China in retaliation. Putin could then call the West's bluff, supporting his friend President Xi by closing the Suez Canal. Sudanese refugees could jeopardise politics in Egypt and in Europe, where many will try to flee.

The Sudanese armed forces are aligned to Iran, their fellow Islamists. For years, Sudan has been an academy of terrorism, exporting jihadists, surely perceived as a threat by the West. Their enemy, the RSF works closely with the Wagner Group, helping Russia bypass sanctions by shipping them billions of dollars' worth of gold each year. Yet, the ongoing conflict in Sudan rates almost no sustained attention from the international community. The UK (the former colonial power) recently decided not to reappoint its special envoy to the country, although the Africa minister, Andrew Mitchell, is a veteran of the campaign to highlight the horrors of the Darfur genocide, and is the lone voice of concern in the government.

The indifference of the world's Muslim leaders to the suffering of Sudan's largely Muslim population is not new. If we are playing the numbers game, Sudan wins hands down against Palestine. In Darfur, 500,000 were killed between 2003-07. When the Islamist regime tried to Arabise and Islamise the Black Africans in the southern part of Sudan, the UN estimates two million died (they eventually became South Sudan, a disaster story in its own right).

When I speak at college or civic groups in the West about Sudan, there is always someone in the audience who is furious that I am not talking about "all the dead Palestinian children" instead of raped and mutilated Sudanese women. The long-term suffering of the Palestinians and Hamas's attack on Israeli civilians on

*"Corrupt, incompetent and brutal Arab and Muslim leaders have leveraged the plight of the Palestinians to distract their own disgruntled citizens and subjects when they become restless. Some lives matter less than others"*

7 October are appalling, but in no way do the numbers compare to the wholesale slaughter in Sudan that has gone on since the military coup in 1989 that brought Islamists to power. And yet, the fate of those Sudanese feature in the sidebar of newspapers, and hardly at all on TV news reports.

In 2004, an Arab League Commission of Inquiry into the Darfur genocide condemned attacks on civilians as "massive violations of human rights."

However, the statement was quickly removed from the League's website.

Commentators blamed "solidarity" and fear of giving credence to Zionists, much as some Western academics refrained from criticising Khartoum for fear of appearing anti-Muslim or anti-Arab. According to Sudanese democracy activist Magdy el-Baghdadi, "Darfuris are simply the wrong kind of Muslims because they are black and African."

For the academic, Moses Eebe Ochunu, "Arabs still generally regard the Darfur genocide as a public relations disaster rather than as a barbaric racist war against black people." Egyptian analyst Gehad Auda contends: "Arabs always condemn Israel because it rejects UN resolutions and its army collaborates with settlers who want to take land away from their rightful owners. Yet that is exactly what is going on in Sudan right now."

Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan supported fellow Islamist leader, Sudan's then president Field Marshall Bashir, saying, "No Muslim could perpetrate a genocide. It is not possible for a Muslim to commit genocide."

However, Black African intellectuals challenge the widely held notion that because of Arab exceptionalism, racism does not exist in Arab society. Toyin Falola cites: "The language of denial and obfuscation that has become the defining feature of Arab responses to charges of racism against blacks." Arab claims that they are always victims "fails to explain why Arab media regularly refer to President Barack Obama as 'N\*\*\*\*\*r Obama.'"

What can be done?

The Sudan war will continue while both sides receive military support from abroad. Cutting off its supplies could be achieved by forcing the Egyptians to stop arming the Sudanese armed forces, and preventing the UAE from shipping arms to the RSF via Chad. It would also help to freeze the overseas assets of both military groups, and to indict their leaders for war crimes. But all of this requires the political will of the international community, and that is unlikely to manifest itself anytime soon.

In the meantime, Waging Peace, the NGO I founded in 2004, is helping Sudanese refugees who arrive in the UK. Any donation is greatly appreciated. Please visit [www.WagingPeace.info](http://www.WagingPeace.info)

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Rebecca Tinsley is director of Waging Peace

# A RAPID & UNCONTROLLED DISASSEMBLY OF GOVERNMENT

Suella Braverman's campaign against rough sleepers was enough to put J Frasier Hewitt off breakfast, and the rest of the Government looks hopeless to a former Tory too

One Saturday morning, not that long ago, I woke in an unusually cheerful mood. Silently, I contemplated what awaited me downstairs. Eggs for scrambling, coffee for brewing and my weekend paper, the FT (natch), for perusing.

It was with giddy excitement that I flung back the covers, leapt from my bed and hastened to the staircase. Carefully making my way past the assorted collection of items on the stairway, I picked my way through the veritable minefield of staplers, shirts and last night's half-finished glass of Glenfarclas (a singular example in my view as to the near criminal inflation rates over the course of 2023).

On achieving the unthinkable and reaching my front door without slip, staple or spill I retrieved my newspaper from the letterbox and made my way with a not insignificant air of superiority and self-satisfaction to the kitchen table. Some moments later, with the sourdough in the toaster, the coffee ground and in its pot, waiting for the excited whistle of the kettle, I sat and surveyed the supplements of the Weekend pink 'un.

The Life and Arts section led with a piece about the woes of English National Opera. I quite agree that there is an issue, what on earth will the Highgate and Holland Park sets do on a Friday night without another tedious reimagining of La Bohème to gush over? House and Home carried a puff-piece on the Gove-ster's favourite housing goon, Nicholas Boys Smith. Skip past the magazine - this is for Sundays - onto the main event.

The toast began to smell toasted and the kettle bubbles. Front page of the paper, "Hopes build for US \ soft landing" – no not a piece on a Musk-led mission to Mars, rather a piece on the previous day's jobs figures in the United States and the investor expectation that the US economy had begun to cool while avoiding a recession. Then a piece on the unfolding horror in the middle east.

## SIMMERING BLOOD

What lay below the fold? My blood began to simmer and then turn to a rolling boil as the kettle began its gentle whistle and I digested the text in front of me, "Braverman seeks to curb rough sleepers by restricting use of tents on the streets". My temperature rose as I stood to turn the gas ring off and retrieve my toast. Fool that I am, I contemplated the headline in hope

"perhaps, it is a sub-editor's hyperbole.", I tell myself. "Perhaps, it isn't as bad as all that". I buttered the toast, now forgetting all about the delicious eggs that I had planned and poured the boiled water into the waiting coffee pot.

Returning to the table, I studied the piece in more detail, it read: "Suella Braverman is seeking to restrict the use of tents by homeless people in urban areas as the government grapples with rising numbers of rough sleepers on Britain's streets, according to Whitehall insiders.

"The home secretary's proposals also include a new civil offence to deter charities from giving tents to the homeless"

"...Government Figures show that 298,439 households (my emphasis) received help from their council or were threatened by homelessness in the year to April 2023..."

Increasing numbers among the British public are threatened with losing their homes and their Home Secretary's plan for dealing with this was to ban people's ability to gain shelter in its most primitive form?

It matters not that this 'humdinger' of a notion was not acted upon. It matters not that Conservative colleagues of the now (thankfully) former Home Secretary have rounded on her for even floating this turd of a policy idea. It matters not that this latest depressing episode only goes to confirm the worst fears of those moderate Tories who sit at our breakfast tables, wishing and weeping for times gone-by (come back cones hotline, all is forgiven).

What matters is that this policy was uttered in the first place. What matters is that at some level of this government this was actually considered, even for only a moment, even if only to upset some in opposition. What matters is that it displays the depths to which this once great party of government has plumbed and the example it is setting for the voting public.

My former party is in a state of disorder and discord. They are led by a man who oscillates between weaponising social issues, putting himself at the centre of such bilge and then hiring back David Cameron to appeal to moderates. This isn't big-tent politics it's government by schizophrenia.

There are still good, sensible, people who understand the value and effect that well-formed policy can bring about. Many of these will leave Parliament at the next

election whether they wish to do so, or not. This will, in part, be because the now former Home Secretary, and others, are behaving like the neighbourhood delinquents putting local businesses and services to fire because they like to warm themselves by the flames.

The result will be to ensure that there are even fewer Conservative parliamentarians who will have the experience of having been in government to hold the next administration to account, regardless of that administration's colours. If you think this is a good thing, then you're a damned fool. Whether they are in government or in opposition, after the next election the parliamentary Conservative party will need to have a cultural memory of what governance is and how to do it. Without this they will be less effective as a unit and legislation will be the poorer for it. That will affect us all alike; Liberal, Socialist and Conservative.

It will allow the furtherance of poor policy and, therefore, legislation. Recent examples of which can be found within the meagre contents of the first King's Speech in more than 70 years:

- Legislation that will force defendants to attend their sentencing hearing – I struggle to see the point of this prize piece of gesture politics.
- Powers to allow prisoners to serve their sentences abroad in order to tackling overcrowding – a new take on the Costa del Crime.
- A favourite among Conservatives in the United States, mandatory minimum sentences. Specifically for murders where there is a sexual or 'sadistic' conduct. Thus, removing the discretion of High Court Judges to actually do their jobs in the most high-profile cases in the land – not entirely helpful. It should also be said that rapists and other perverts will not qualify for early release under new rules, so the notion of prison being there to help reform a character has also been dumped.
- An idea to ensure that the Home Office is kept abreast of security and privacy updates for messaging platforms. I dread to think what might go wrong there, even if such a Bill did ever see the light of day.
- Reform of the section 21 no fault evictions. On the face of it, a good thing. But the implementation will be delayed until 'new court procedures are in place' - which will be when, exactly?

There was also mention of an independent football regulator, more guff on new licences for North Sea gas and oil and the one genuinely useful piece of legislation, an effective ban on smoking for people who will turn 18 in four years time.

This single final piece of legislation might actually contribute some long-term good towards society in decades to come but the gibberish around Network North, trade and digital markets is aspirational nonsense that is designed to make the government look as though they have an economic plan. Let me be clear, aside from ensuring that there is not another market scare around UK government debt and sterling, there is no plan.

We can see that there is no plan because the single biggest long-term crisis threatening the UK economy was absent from the speech – housing. We can see that there is no plan because the much-vaunted proposals around private pensions were nowhere to be seen. We can see that there is no plan because the central piece of policy in the King's speech concerned with economic activity was banning boycotts of Israel – quite what these defenders of liberal democracy think they will achieve by undermining the right of local authorities to decide where they purchase their goods and services from is beyond me.

## PISSING IN

However happy I am to see the back of Braverman and the return of Cameron, I cannot help but know that it will not solve this government's problems. Braverman is now outside the tent, pissing in; Lord Cameron is a poor substitute for Sunak's first pick, William Hague; Sunak's backbenchers are still split into mutually loathing camps that cannot be reconciled; economic growth is still over the horizon; GB News still hates him; the Daily Mail still doesn't trust him; and all the while time ticks down to the next election.

The Conservative government's response to the recent by-election defeats appears to have been to stick the car into neutral and roll it down the hill to demonstrate forward motion. Even where they attempt to appear to be doing something useful, it is painful to watch the cack-handedness of their bungling.

The Bletchley Summit was a pathetic attempt to breathe life into the rotting corpse of British exceptionalism. That was clear from the get-go, why else would the Americans send Kamala Harris?

Bletchley was about a Britain that was, a sepia-tinted nation of yesteryear, not the Britain of today. Our government, yet again, looked back to a splendid history of innovation and heroics instead of engaging in the hard work of beginning the planning and conversations with our partners for the years to come. We again called to the past glories of British history and therefore failed to use the moment of today.

The outcome of the summit? A lengthy meaningless statement encouraging

"...all relevant actors to provide context-appropriate transparency and accountability on their plans to measure, monitor and mitigate potentially harmful capabilities and the associated effects that may emerge, in particular to prevent misuse and issues of control, and the amplification of other risks."

And a sterile resolution to "...support an internationally inclusive network of scientific research on frontier AI safety..."

So, like an infinitely forgettable wedding-day, where the venue charges £10 for a gin and ginger, and the bride's father surveys the output from an otherwise perfectly good house deposit, the UK government gained only platitudes and a bloody great catering bill for their efforts. The prime minister was happy though, he got to interview for his next job with a man who really does understand the value of a rapid unscheduled disassembly.

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J Frasier Hewitt is a northerner who, once upon a time, considered himself a Conservative party member and campaign manager

# RUNNING UP THE DOWN ESCALATOR

## Mid Bedfordshire showed the Liberal Democrats how not to campaign, but Michael Meadowcroft sees a lesson from Poland in how to effectively take on nationalism and populism

Three recent elections were each in their own way highly significant. Two parliamentary by-elections were disastrous for the Liberal Democrats. In Tamworth, the Liberal Democrat candidate polled 1.6%, the lowest vote for any Liberal or Liberal Democrats candidate at any election for 75 years - since the Glasgow Camlachie by-election of 1948. At the other, in Mid Bedfordshire, the Labour candidate took the seat from the Conservatives despite a full and strong Liberal Democrat campaign.

This campaign showed, I was told in 17 national mailings over 83 days, that our candidate was on the edge of winning; one such mailing told me "our canvassing shows that we are heading for a razor-close finish between us and the Conservatives." In fact we finished third, 11% and 4,350 votes adrift from the winning Labour candidate. Either the canvassing was woefully inaccurate or party headquarters lied.

Almost as significant was that, despite intensive campaigning by all three parties, the turnout was just 44%; in other words the Liberal Democrats were unable to inspire or even entice anywhere near enough of the electorate to vote for us.

Turnout matters less for Conservative and Labour parties which still depend to a large, if diminishing, extent on a class vote. Liberals and Liberal Democrat have no such semi-automatic vote and have therefore to build a core vote almost from scratch and to persuade potential supporters to make the effort to vote on polling day. In a three-way by-election the turnout for a Liberal Democrat to win has to be much higher. Even in two of the three earlier 'straight fight' by-election victories the turnouts were substantially higher.

### ALARMING LESSONS

The alarming lessons from these two by-elections are that, first, where Labour is feasibly in contention the electorate will favour them over Liberals Democrats and, second, we have basically no core vote - electors who will vote Liberal Democrat come what may.

The latter affects the former. The consequence of these two indications is that the 'blue wall' seats will only fall to the Liberal Democrats, and, indeed, the by-election gains will only be held, if the Conservatives are at a uniquely low level. One other factor is that on the day following the Mid Beds election, the party's deputy leader, Daisy Cooper, commented that the party "had contributed to the Conservative loss by

getting Conservative votes to vote Liberal Democrat who would not vote Labour." The moment she uttered the words I could hear Conservative HQ re-quoting her at the general election, "voting Liberal Democrat lets Labour in." And, alas, the party's naïve and cosy attitude to fighting Labour encourages this myopia.

The outcome of the third election was very different. Against all anticipation the incumbent Polish right-wing coalition government lost its majority and a pro-EU coalition headed by former EU president and acknowledged Liberal, Donald Tusk, was formed on 11 November to take over the government.

It was the first time that the dangerous trend towards nationalist and populist parties across Europe has clearly been reversed. How did this come about? By the huge increase in the electoral turnout, from 61.7% to 74.4% - the highest turnout since the end of Communist rule. Even more to the point the Polish analysis of the vote demonstrates that the main increase, of 22.4%, was in young electors (aged 18 to 29).

The lesson is clear: nationalism and populism can be defeated by inspiring previously disillusioned electors, and particularly younger ones, to turn them out at the ballot box. I would add the example of Emmanuel Macron in France, who was the first French politician to take on the then Front National candidate, Marine Le Pen intellectually. In the head-to-head televised debate for second round of the presidential election in 2017; Le Pen's poll rating fell by four points overnight.

Have the British Liberal Democrats taken note of these three elections and noted the dangers of the by-elections and the opportunities of the Polish general election?

Not at all! The response of Mike Dixon, the party's chief executive, immediately after the by-elections was as ever Dr Pangloss, telling the party how well it had done. It was the same after the local elections in May when gains were recorded in many smaller authorities but the results were very poor in the cities and other local authorities with more than 300,000 population. (My analysis of the 2022 large council results is available at: <https://www.beemeadowcroft.uk/liberalism/liberal-articles/liberal-democrat-performance-on-large-councils-may-2022>)

What is quite bizarre and, indeed, indefensible, is that the party just isn't bothered. It shows no interest in reviving an organisation in derelict seats, which certainly include more than half the constituencies and far more than half of Labour held areas. The abject low state of the party's local organisation

is hidden in many urban areas by grouping seats together in a single association. For instance, all eight Leeds constituencies, seven of which (plus a single ward) have no self-starting organisation, are now a single association with no interest in initiating party organisation in the rest of the city. The same situation applies in Bradford.

It is shameful for a political party with its antecedents in a Liberal Party that had a definite distinctive and attractive philosophy, and a nationwide presence, to be reduced to a minority incapable of promoting a radical vision identifiably different to the two other parties, and consequently fails to inspire key local movers and shakers - not least those younger electors who have changed the Polish political scene - to commit themselves to the long sacrificial but worthwhile campaign to change society.

History is important and the comparisons with today is salutary: the Liberal vote at the February 1974 election was 19.3% and had all the seats been contested the vote would have approached 23% - a level not reached by the 'new' party until 2005. The vote in 2019 was half that figure.

The mishandling of the 2010 coalition can be blamed for the sudden cataclysmic drop in the party's electoral appeal, but that was over a decade ago and the lack of party identity and organisation has inhibited the creation of a core vote and a Liberal revival. The poll figures have struggled to rise above single figures for 11 years. Even the remarkable by-election victories cannot overcome the lack of a presence and an identity. There has to be visibility on the ground to garner the increased apparent electability of by-election successes. The February 1974 vote came on the back of five successive by-election victories which fell on fertile ground nationally. On the back of this result the party organisation tackled the hundred or so derelict seats and, just eight months later, was in a position to present Liberal candidates in all but four of the same number of seats as the two main parties. This urgent and important task is simply not happening today.

The need to earn a core vote is far more crucial to the Liberal Democrats than to the two main parties because the latter can rely on an automatic class based vote. Class is less of an electoral issue than in earlier elections but it still exists, as the distinct swathes of red and blue across the electoral map show vividly. There is no class vote for the Liberal Democrats and, whereas this has advantages in not being under pressure to favour a sociological group, it has the disadvantage that to succeed the party has to have a clear vision of the kind of society it seeks and campaigns for and to get this across incrementally to the electorate, not in detail or via reams of policy, but by the emphasis on human values, community, internationalism, the public service, participation in industry, civil rights, real democracy, accessible health, etc.

These broad issues of philosophy and values are not of themselves going to sweep the country at an election but they will attract that minority of citizens who are concerned about the woes of society and the urgent needs of many individuals which have clearly not been addressed by the two other parties tied as they are to old centralised concepts, simplistic nationalism and

riven by internal divisions.

## **BAPTISING HOSEPIPE**

There is a huge gap today waiting to be filled by a forthright and confident Liberalism. Winning electoral support for Liberalism is not a one stage operation. There is no way of baptising the electorate with a hosepipe, but it is possible to inspire and persuade those who are concerned and prepared to consider seeking action via a different politics. It is these individuals whom we pinpointed and recruited in Leeds from the early days of the Liberal revival in the city in 1968. It was horses for courses and those who were already involved in their local community were often prepared to become candidates there.

It was not just local issues that attracted them, some highly political individuals were drawn in by the Liberals' principled stand on electorally unpopular issues of principle. For instance, we recruited a number of excellent individuals from the left-Liberal flank of the Labour Party who were appalled by the Labour government's 1968 Commonwealth Immigration Act, sparked by the Kenyan Asians' problems following the election of Jomo Kenyatta and who were thereafter prevented from entering the UK even though the Labour government had earlier promised them this right. These individuals, having seen Labour from the vantage point of a principled Liberal Party, never went back and they became candidates and activists. With this background I part company with the idea that the party should mainly concentrate its campaigning on issues high up on the list of issues of most concern to the public.

At a recent Liberal Democrat History Group meeting Lord Newby told the audience that a respected political commentator had recently told him that those party members keen to focus campaigning on old favourites such as Europe and on electoral reform would be "bonkers" given how low they feature on the list of issues of interest to the public.

Dick Newby is one of the best Liberal advocates and I am delighted that he is in charge of the manifesto preparations, but I believe he is wrong on this tactical issue. These two issues, and a few others of principle, may not excite the broad public but those they do attract individuals prepared to commit themselves to the party and to campaign and to organise for it, thus becoming, for instance, the channel of persuasion on the doorstep.

Given the pitiful state of the party today I cannot imagine why anyone concerned about the state of politics today would commit himself or herself to a long sacrificial local and then national leadership role in the Liberal Democrats. Time is running out and I see no sign that the Liberal Democrats are capable of putting together a coherent well-argued document setting out a Liberal vision for the very different political, social and economic challenges the country faces.

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Michael Meadowcroft was Liberal MP for Leeds West 1983-87

# AND SO TO MID BEDS

The failure in Mid Bedfordshire holds three lessons the Liberal Democrats should have the wisdom to learn from, says Roger Hayes

For the Liberal Democrats the Mid-Bedfordshire by-election was undoubtedly a disappointment, but it was also a missed opportunity, and a valuable lesson. I hope the party has the grace and the wisdom to accept all three.

I started going up to Mid-Beds as soon as Nadine Dorries announced her intention to stand down. Had she done so when she said she would I am sure Emma Holland-Lindsay would now be the Libs Dems 16th MP. However, it was during that long phoney-war, over the frequently wet summer, that the three key lessons for the party took form and led to a narrow (in the circumstances) defeat rather than another triumphant victory.

Back in June the pundits and the bookies were clear, the contest would be another double-header between the incumbent Tories and the best placed challengers, the Lib Dems. Even the Progressive Alliance called it for the Lib Dems and recommending non-Tory to back us. Although starting in third place, as with North Shropshire and Tiverton and Honiton, the Lib Dems were seen as the party most likely to attract a large swathe of disaffected Tory voters and win the seat.

## HOMEMADE BANNERS

Homemade banners began to appear in the constituency and a strong anti-Tory feeling was replicated on the doorsteps.

As Dorries' threat to resign "wiith immediate effect" looked like an increasingly remote possibility, and July offered up one of wetttest summers on record, it became difficult to attract activists to the-by-election-that-might-never-be.

Meanwhile, in rural Somerset, the Lib Dems had been gearing up for another potential by-election in the once-held seat of Somerton and Frome. From April 2022, the Conservative MP David Warburton had had the whip suspended and been under investigation following three allegations of sexual harassment, but he didn't eventually resigned until 19 June 2023. Leaving only a skeleton crew in Mid-Beds, the party decamped to Somerset for the duration and the by-election, which elected Sarah Dyke as the Lib Dems' 15th MP, was held on 20 July. And while the cat's away ...

The Labour Party had been sniffing around Flitwick and Ampthill, the two main towns in the constituency,

**Nadine Dorries has abandoned the people who voted for her...**

**...and so has Keir Starmer's London Labour candidate.**

The Labour candidate in Mid Bedfordshire is still a councillor in Walthamstow, East London - but residents there wouldn't know it. He is facing criticism back home that he has abandoned the community he is supposed to represent. Yet he has refused to resign - and is still pocketing nearly £40,000 from taxpayers.

**Only Lib Dem Emma will be the hard working MP Bedfordshire deserves.**

Mid Bedfordshire deserves a hard working MP. An MP who is really committed to our area and fighting for us on the issues that matter.

**Lib Dem Emma Holland-Lindsay lives here in Bedfordshire with her family.**

Unlike some candidates, Emma hasn't just turned up here because there is an election.

**Emma has already built a reputation for campaigning for Bedfordshire.**

Emma is a local councillor and is fighting to improve GP access. She wants real action to tackle rising household bills, mortgages and rent.

Emma Holland-Lindsay is 100% committed to fighting for Bedfordshire.

**She is the hard working MP that people in Mid Bedfordshire deserve.**

for some weeks to test the possibilities and, of course, they never had any intention of spending time in Somerton and Frome. However, the Lib Dems' justifiable, full-on commitment to a seat it once held allowed Labour virtually a month's free run at Mid-Beds.

The main effect that this new-found Labour activity was more to confuse the electorate, rather than to convince them to switch to Labour.

In most of the recent by-elections, and particularly in the May local elections earlier this year, there has been a marked difference between the nature of results where the Lib Dems have been successful compared with Labour wins. With the great help of John Swarbrick, a significant piece of results analysis shows that in both parliamentary by-elections and local council elections, Labour gains from Conservatives are far more likely to result from drops in turnout where the Tory vote stays at home and the Labour vote remains substantially the same.

By contrast, in these same sets of contests, Lib Dem gains are far more likely to be where turnout is maintained or even increased resulting in significant increases in the LD vote and a decline in the Conservative vote. Lib Dem successes are based on winning over voters and building the base, whereas Labour wins have been far more reliant on just getting its regular vote out while the Tories stay away and sit on their hands.

This was the case at Mid-Bedfordshire. The turnout plummeted by 35 percentage points from the general election, 6% below the average turnout for recent Lib Dem gains. Once again, the Tory vote fell through the floor, while Labour got fewer votes than it did at the 2019 general election. However, the Lib Dems more than doubled their percentage of the poll and increased the actual number of votes won. It would be fair to say that the missing 30% of voters were almost entirely ex-Tory voters – disgusted by their own party yet uninspired by Labour.

Some may think it a rather cheeky stretch, but I would not rule out a Focus headline at the general election next year proclaiming “Only the Lib Dems can beat the Tories here in Mid-Beds!” There are 25,000 Tory votes still going begging and Emma Holland-Lindsay is far better placed to pick them up than anyone Labour can field.

The undeniable pattern of both the past two years' parliamentary by-elections, coupled with all the evidence from the local election results in May, is Labour wins when Tories stay at home – Lib Dems win when they convince Tories to switch sides and come and vote positively for them.

Labour didn't win Mid-Beds, the Tories gave it away and Labour just happened to be the new high-water mark. The tide may come back in, but I doubt the Labour vote will rise substantially as a result.

The first of three key lessons is about a 'looong'

*“Labour wins when Tories stay at home – Lib Dems win when they convince Tories to switch sides and come and vote positively for them”*

campaign. By the time Dorries finally got round to resigning in late August, nearly three months after she said she would, voter fatigue was already setting in. Come polling day many voters were begging for it to end. No matter how good your candidate, and how unpopular the Tories, you still have to campaign for real things that matter and give people a reason to vote for you.

Emma was a very good candidate and deserves to be an MP, but voters require variety and purpose – just not being the Tories was not enough. Although some were

convinced to vote Lib Dem, 60% of Tories stayed at home – at least half of them will turnout again at the general election, but who will they vote for? Mid-Beds is now a three-way marginal and there is every chance it could be won by the Lib Dems at a general election.

## INFAMOUS BAR CHARTS

Second is that Labour is the competition. The Lib Dems have become too used to binary choice campaigns in Tory-facing seats. The (in)famous LD bar chart and “Labour can't win here” slogan comes as standard on all literature. The problem is the party might have begun to believe its own propaganda.

Labour turning up certainly caused confusion with the voters, but I think it also confused the Lib Dem organisation. Just doing more of the same and hoping the electorate will get the hang of it clearly didn't work. We have got to go back to proper community campaigns and show people why Liberal campaigns and Liberal politics is better and why it is worth voting for. Take a look at what Wimbledon does because the Labour Party won't be rolling over there either.

The third is about fighting on two fronts. Somerton and Frome should not be seen as a distraction from Mid-Beds, the party has to develop a proper 'big wing' strategy that enables it to fight on multiple fronts with varying messages according to the local circumstances. The Labour Party is a centrally controlled, lumbering machine. The Lib Dems must remain alert and nimble, locally organised and regionally responsive – capable of moving from one thing, and one place, to another and back again without batting an eye.

This is the sort of thinking and organisation at the general election that will make the difference between winning 20 seats and 50; between 50 and 80; or more. The Tories may be a busted flush but where those disaffected voted go is still very far from certain.

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Roger Hayes is a former Lib Dem council leader and parliamentary candidate in Kingston and helped with the front of house operation at Mid Bedfordshire

# A LONG ROAD HOME

## Getting the UK back into the European Union can only be a long-term goal, though one helped by Brexit's manifest failings, says Nick Harvey

I have recently become chief executive of the European Movement, the organisation set up by Churchill and others after WW2 to promote unity among Europe's peoples and nations. In its heyday in the 1970s when Britain joined the EEC, its nadir was 2016 and the disastrous Brexit vote.

The consequences of that suicidal choice are now evident all around. Bloomberg Economics calculates the current Brexit blow to Britain's GDP at £100bn a year (it will only get worse over time), so roughly a £40bn hit to the Exchequer. The Brexiteer bus claimed that leaving would save £350m a week, but in fact it is now costing us more than twice that: some £769m weekly.

Put another way, that hole in our public finances equates to 7p in the pound on the 20% basic income tax rate – which a right-wing government could have given as a tax cut, or a progressive one used to rebuild broken public services.

While the last few years have seen a difficult investment climate everywhere, in the EU it has at least grown by 2% since 2016, but in once-buoyant Britain it has fallen by 31%.

We have chronic labour shortages in the NHS, care, hospitality, agriculture and transport after cutting off the supply of European workers. Our food prices have soared by £6bn (over 1p on income tax). Immigration has risen not fallen – so much for taking back control of our borders.

### DREADFUL OUTCOMES

Amidst these truly dreadful outcomes, it is small wonder that public attitudes are shifting. Whereas 48% thought Brexit a bad idea in June 2016, around 60% do now. Superficially, this might look as though reversing the disaster might be imminent, but sadly things are more complicated.

Three epic hurdles must be cleared before we regain our rightful place at the heart of Europe. Firstly, a British Government must take an enormous, indeed existential, gamble by applying for accession.

Secondly, the EU must be convinced that joining is the “settled will of the British people” and that a different government wouldn't take us back out again – or at least resume the in/out psychodrama (in practice, we must deliver either the Conservative Party, or proportional representation). Thirdly, the British public must vote resoundingly to join and put the issue to bed (52:48 the other way would be no good.)

Only when that public vote looks convincingly ‘in the bag’ can the first two happen. We will need to sustain a big majority for joining over a period of time before Westminster or Brussels will be convinced. My challenge, and that of all pro-European campaigners,

is to work out how to get there.

At present, though 60% think Brexit has failed, less than 20% want to reopen the debate or have another referendum. So, support as yet is far too soft to withstand ‘enemy fire’ (something Lib Dem strategies have sometimes forgotten). The public may be fed up, but they are still suffering post-traumatic stress disorder from 2016 and the 2019 People's Vote battle and many just don't want those wounds reopening.

There is a big jump between admitting that Brexit has failed and supporting the case to join the EU again.

Psychologically, for someone who voted Leave, Brexit failing is someone else's fault – but voting to return would be an admission that they themselves got it wrong the first time. We must give them the time and space to make that journey and support and nudge them along the way to doing so.

Key to success will be strategic patience. There is no chance of clearing all three hurdles within the next five-year parliament. Fulfilling our crusade even within the following term would be a huge ask. Once you grasp that this is a 10-year project, the outline strategy for achieving our goal begins to write itself.

The starting point, as ever, is to assess the battle ground. We will shortly undertake a huge polling exercise to segment the British population, to work out who we need to reach. But we do know that the electorate broadly comprises: people who are firmly pro-European; people who are firmly anti-European; people with less firm views who may have voted either way in 2016.

The second group is a lost cause – we will never win them. We must focus on, convert and solidify the swing voters. This includes many people who voted Remain in 2016 but are not guaranteed to do so again. So, tone is crucial: positive not negative, inclusive not divisive, looking forward to the future, not back to 2016. Taking people with us. Taking time.

Once we know who our target segments are, we must meet them where they are (socially, politically, culturally, geographically, economically) rather than where we are. We need to take them on a gradual journey from where they are to supporting joining the EU, and not frighten them off with too strident a ‘rejoin’ message at the outset.

Those who are younger, more educated and prosperous are generally more pro-European, although a young colleague talked to some recent graduates in a pub and found they weren't even familiar with the word ‘Brexit’. It is sobering to think that anyone born after 1998 was too young to vote in 2016. We may reach a point when even banging on about Brexit ceases to make sense.

However we do it, we must target where we expect to yield the most converts. That is not to say we ignore



firm pro-Europeans, but any political movement devoting its primary effort into shoring up its own support is on the back foot and in serious trouble (blowing the dog-whistle).

When Britain entered the EEC in the 1970s, a generation bought into a vision of what Europe was striving to be. Nowadays, to many people the EU looks like a faceless bureaucracy. Somehow, we must fire a new generation with the dream of what an outward, generous, positive and confident Europe can mean.

So, how do we get there? Like the Lib Dems, the European Movement has a step-by-step approach. The first is coaxing the public to join the dots between the shambles all around and cutting off our key market. Thematic campaigning on the erosion of standards on river pollution, food quality and workers' protections. Cultural ties, including travel, work and study opportunities, like rejoining Erasmus+. Musicians and performers being able to tour.

Next year sees an election. Many pro-Europeans crave its being about Europe, but I fear they are wrong. The public has not moved enough for that to be productive. Keir Starmer is not going to make it an election issue, and you can see why: he must win back the red wall seats which were firmly Leave, and he is on course to do so campaigning on the cost of living, broken economy and public services. He would be mad to re-open the Pandora's box of Brexit and potentially throw the Tories a lifeline.

For Ed Davey, the equation is similar. The Lib Dems won 11 seats in 2019 – if we double that to 22 next time, it may be true that the lowest-hanging fruit is in Remain areas. But if we could treble it to 33 (and replace the SNP as Parliament's third party), the next tranche of seats includes many Leave areas – including three by-election defences in Honiton, Somerton & Frome and North Shropshire.

If our candidates in Winchester and Wimbledon want to campaign on Europe, more power to their elbow. But if Ed Davey uses our miniscule bandwidth talking about Europe, which voters don't even include in their top ten concerns, he will hobble many of his key seat candidates. We did that to them in 2015, 2017 and 2019. Please could we just stop? It is the definition of political madness to keep doing the same thing yet expect a different outcome. We cannot keep re-running the 2016 Brexit battle.

A new Government with a more positive attitude to Europe can take more steps. It could signal Britain's intention to co-operate more over medicines, aviation, shipping, security, data, AI and the Copernicus space programme. It could guarantee, as a minimum, that regulations we helped develop in the EU would be sustained, or better that we will maintain 'dynamic alignment'. It could relieve the labour market by easing working visas for EU citizens.

None of this need frighten the horses in red wall seats. Starmer has shown welcome 'ankle' by saying he wants to go beyond a dry five-yearly review of the

*“Three epic hurdles must be cleared before we regain our rightful place at the heart of Europe”*

deal. So, as a third step it would be good to see financial services covered (excluded by Boris Johnson at the expense of the tiny fishing industry), veterinary standards resolved, mutual recognition of professional standards and security co-operation embraced.

## **FLAWED CONCEPTION**

None of this will 'make Brexit work' - it cannot be made to work; it is an

inherently flawed conception.

So, beyond that, a fourth step is the customs union – reducing some border friction but easier than the fifth step – the single market, which opens the vexed question of freedom of movement, which we need a sustained campaign to detoxify. That is almost certainly a second term issue.

The ultimate step, EU accession, would be simpler if we were already in the customs union and single market. Each time the public sees pragmatic dialogue with Europe resulting in practical improvements, we will normalise friendly relations with our closest neighbours and move our project forward.

These are practical steps, but more important is the battle to win hearts and minds and promote European values: peace, security, democracy, rule of law, common culture and history and the warm hand of friendship from our closest friends and allies.

Europe is our home. It can offer young people better opportunities to work, study, travel, settle and nurture their hopes. Europe is our best platform for global influence: to tackle climate change, migration of peoples, health and security risks.

On security, I see global plates shifting: China seeking to replace America as world leader, moving in concert with Russia, Iran and possibly even North Korea. China sat quietly as Putin launched his war in Ukraine, only criticising mildly after reverberations in the global (and Chinese) economy. Who knows what hand Iran played in provoking the atrocities in Israel and consequences in Gaza? Some even see BRICS replacing the G7 as the goal: when Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and UAE join BRICS in January 2024, the lion's share of world oil and gas reserves will be in their hands.

Hoving into view may be the grim spectre of Donald Trump. How foolish in such times for Britain to detach from its closest friends and neighbours?!

The European Movement is the oldest, biggest and strongest group committed explicitly to regaining our place at the heart of Europe. Come and join our campaign.

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Nick Harvey is chief executive of the European Movement and was Liberal Democrat MP for North Devon 1992-2015

# A FEW MORE BRICKS IN THE WALLS

Lib Dem policy risks being easily caricatured as making heroic promises about housing people, while sabotaging every practical step to deliver that promise, writes Gareth Epps

More than any other issue, housing is a topic on which politicians of all parties promise to be all things to all people. Janus-like, manifestos call for ever greater housing limits, while parties campaign against the homes themselves. And so it proved in September, with a Lib Dem policy paper that is internally contradictory in numerous places, focusing attention on the NIMBY vote with an eye-catching commitment to scrap national housing targets.

Conference saw through that and, aided by persuasive speeches in a sometimes ferocious debate, chose instead to prioritise meeting housing need.

However, no solution is set out to how those houses are actually built. With skills shortages in the construction industry running at close to quarter of a million, the magic bullet proposed – modern, modular methods of construction – appears in fact to be in decline. No answers are offered to any of this – so are the promises empty, risking disappointing everybody?

Ultimately, housing is an essential public good with an omerta on its description as such in political discourse. As with many issues in these divided and divisive days, older people are encouraged to see

building new homes as an evil, while millennials are priced out of living in large parts of the country and buying just about everywhere.

## GENERATIONAL IMPACT

There is a generational impact at play here: the numbers wholly owning their homes have swelled to 8.8m, a record high. Classic ‘drawbridge up’ stuff. Meanwhile, rental is changing: absentee landlords renting out properties for holiday lets and the like a problem we have in the Cotswolds on a large scale with various Tory donors reducing the number of available homes. Meanwhile the rise of institutional ‘build to rent’ in urban areas does nothing to bring the drawbridge back down.

Specifically, at present the party is talking up a mortgage protection scheme which is effectively kicking the bottom rung from the ladder. Rental prices are going up by 15% or 20% in London, up to close to 30% of average incomes overall. Whereas proposals for longer, more secure tenancies are important, while there are challenges of supply in the private rented sector, subsidising buy-to-let mortgages is almost certainly not the fair or equitable answer. The issue,

which the party would do well to embrace and which was surprisingly not set out by younger Liberals, is that of generational wealth equality which continues to get worse and fuel the disengagement of younger people with politics.

Of course, the row about national housing targets is a red herring. Policy outcomes in terms of building more homes are barely regulated by planning; the constraints are elsewhere.

For example, if you abolished all planning restrictions and allowed building anywhere, anyhow, there still wouldn’t



be the construction workers to meet any target. This is one of the failings of the similarly libertarian furrow ploughed by the Tories earlier this Parliament. It's not a new problem but is currently made much worse by Brexit, supply chain failures, material cost inflation and the industry's unattractiveness as a career.

Tory deregulation has led to woeful environmental standards with a significant impact on net zero drivers; zero investment in training and notorious poor quality.

Deliberately using inefficient and unsustainable materials, normally wastefully, while reducing everything to the lowest possible cost and standards, frequently governs the ways such developments are run to the exclusion of all else.

Volume housebuilders are the pariahs of the construction industry; they are the only places I have seen incidences of modern slavery and the only construction sites where I have had cause to raise anonymous reports to the Health & Safety Executive. All too often, developers can't be bothered and aren't made to bother; in exchange, the sound of cash into Tory coffers hardly helps depolarise local housing debate.

This Tory Government that was barely a year ago saying "build, build, build" has had to say construction is one of those where skill shortages are so acute that its draconian immigration policies are being eased.

The only parts of the country where construction careers are supported are those where structures have clung on without funding; austerity, successive Tory assaults on vocational education and a lack of engagement from much of the industry in training have all contributed to a worsening skills situation.

Walk onto most housebuilding sites and ask how many apprentices there are, and you'll get blank looks. These projects tend to be run with a blind eye turned to subcontractors subcontracting, no formal training or support for careers in construction, and standards in safety and quality that are embarrassingly poor.

Much of this isn't even in the name of efficiency; on one project I visited recently, perhaps halfway through building 300 units, a quarter of the land area was being used to store a quantity of bricks dumped there that would have sufficed for a site five times the size, many damaged through poor housekeeping and having been left to the elements for years. That's without getting onto the low environmental standards that further fan the flames of NIMBYism.

The other set of constraints that would still exist can be seen in local authorities up and down the country where local plan allocated development sites remain undeveloped; because a housing company has said the time isn't right for everyone to make their margins, or because the landowners and developers are squabbling with one another. This isn't helped by the planners - who could be banging heads together - having all been made redundant after years of austerity, with too many of those who are left wasting time

*“Policy outcomes in terms of building more homes are barely regulated by planning; the constraints are elsewhere”*

micromanaging householder applications.

In trying to justify the ending of national housebuilding targets, the policy paper draws one sustainable conclusion: that without a shift to modern methods of construction and sustainable materials, the negative impact on net zero of largescale housebuilding is unavoidable. Modular construction requires less labour and is also much quicker. However, the demise of the modular construction arm of Legal

& General (now a volume housebuilder as well as investor), shutting its Leeds factory citing weak demand, and a number of significant supply chain failures suggest that without regulation forcing a change in approach, the dysfunctional nature of the market will not do so alone.

## UMBILICAL LINK

And that market cannot be ignored. The umbilical link between developers and landowners has barely been challenged since the days of Lloyd George, making homes still less affordable; the solution, of course, is land value taxation. Modular construction can reduce embodied carbon and cost; there are significant developments in part of the UK, but too few and far between. It's like the way we've learned nothing about retrofit from the two big Government interventions of the last decade: the Green Deal under the Coalition, or the Green Homes Grant. Both deeply flawed, because both failed to recognise the true nature of the problems in the supply chain. I say this having waited three years for a contractor for relatively straightforward retrofit work. Again, there is a huge pipeline of economically beneficial and sustainable work, but nobody capable and willing to do it. The trouble is that unless the market is subject to an intervention, the deeply conservative volume housebuilders won't change, and we will continue to build leaky, inefficient, unaffordable and unsustainable homes.

By focusing on the essentially libertarian solution of national targets without taking the steps needed to fix the market to enable more homes to be built, Lib Dem policy risks being easily caricatured as making heroic promises about housing people on the one hand, while sabotaging every practical step to deliver that promise on the other. For clarity, no other party has a solution that's any better. But without fixing the bloody housing market, bluntly, you won't - as the Young Liberals' slogan puts it - build more bloody homes.

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Gareth Epps is a member of the Liberator Collective and served on many policy working groups and saw too many mediocre policy papers as a member of the Lib Dem Federal Policy Committee for ten years

# WHERE IT ALL WENT WRONG, BUT COULD GO RIGHT

Stewart Rayment looks at a rare academic analysis of the Liberal Democrats, describing how they lost their way but could follow some ideas for recovery

Party president Mark Pack says on the publisher's blurb "Not all Liberal Democrats will agree with the frankness of the authors' assessment of the party's recent years."

Academic studies of the Liberal Democrats and their predecessor the Liberal party, are rare. So, who are David Cutts, Andrew Russell and Joshua Townsley? Townsley has a bit of form; he was deputy head of insight and data at the Liberal Democrats and at the LSE before joining Meta.

Russell is professor of politics at the University of Liverpool and Cutts is professor of political science at the University of Birmingham. Between them, they have been analysing the performance of the Liberal Democrats over the past 20 years or so, and the genesis of this book probably lies in many of their articles over these years. The question that must plague them, is did the Liberal Democrats learn anything from their work over the years and did they apply it?

The authors outline seven themes in their analysis of Liberal Democrat fortunes: the credibility gap; quick-fix solutions have masked structural deficiencies and exposes the vacuum in the political identity of the Liberal Democrats; agency ID is crucial; participation in the Coalition damaged the Liberal Democrats reputation; the 'coalition shock' hampered our ability to resist Brexit, which in turn harmed the party's identity; loss of competitive campaigning edge as rivals have adopted those practices; not masters of their own destiny and reliant on the fortunes of other parties.

## MESMERISED LEADERS

The essence of the Liberal Democrats problems are long term and structural. The advances under the leadership of Paddy Ashdown were based on 20 years or so of the application of community politics. They were too easily thrown away by leaders mesmerised by the quick fix – Liverpool for the Lib-Lab Pact, Tower Hamlets for the Blair Project.

As the leadership nestled up to Labour in the Westminster bubble, their perception of organised opposition never quite recovered. The Liberal Democrats are at the mercy of events outside their control; the Falklands War did for the Alliance, but up to that point one would have to go back to pre-war days to find the party fighting all or the majority of seats – even reaching 50% was a challenge. When Clement Freud won the Isle of Ely by-election there wasn't a party organisation in the constituency (and

probably not in half of those in Eastern region).

Jump forward to the recent round of by-elections, did we contest any of the local government wards in Selby in the May elections? Maybe some around Harrogate, but my imperfect knowledge of boundaries generally drew the negative when I first weighed by the chances, and Mid-Beds didn't look much better.

In the 1960s and early 70s when we kick-started, there was at least still a residual non-conformist vote that could be drawn on – I recall someone being parachuted into a seat with little organisation being told to check out the local Congregationalist or Methodist minister for possible support.

That base has largely gone, and as the authors remind us, the Celtic fringe frequently voted for Brexit alongside demographic changes. I compared notes with colleagues in Hastings from other no-hope constituencies – we are about the same post-Coalition – maybe 100 members (from a high that never peaked 300), about 10 of the active in some way, maybe 20-30 turn up at social events; typically in their 50s or older, often white male professionals, but under-skilled in developing campaigning techniques (few pre-date the Referendum). That was and is the problem; too few people running around trying to do too much, periodically kicked in the groin by the leadership or its machine.

The Coalition remains a problem; a toxicity still lingers – the notorious tuition fees still come up. Throughout the Coalition and its aftermath we were treading water; getting votes in non-target wards that I don't recall since the mid-1960s. Snapping out of that and deciding that we had to win somewhere, we broke that cycle in 2019, but in an otherwise two-party marginal were not able to build on that. In 2017 the Corbyn factor played to Labour, in 2019 to the Tories. Remain voters feared the damage that Corbyn would do more than what Johnson would do. The fear was that socialism would make structural changes, whereas those of Johnson, Brexit included, might more easily be undone.

Nobody anticipated Covid-19, wherein was the start of the cost-of-living crisis for many of the self-employed, typically amongst our activist base. Things did not stop, but too little was done by too few. Yet we struggle on; remain part of a ruling alliance in one of our local authorities, if supplanted by the Green party – younger, with carbon-copy community politics tactics in the other (luckily the Green party organises on a local government basis and typically doesn't cross

constituency boundaries); but we aspire to take control of the county in 2025, more probably jointly than separately.

This underscores what the authors say. There is an adage from Gilbert & Sullivan that every boy and every gal that's born to the world alive is either a little Liberal or else a little Conservative!

There is considerable political psychological evidence to prove that this is the case. In going into coalition with the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats overlooked the extent that this played on their core support.

By-and-large, the Coalition did work, it will be looked upon as the last period of sane government; this point should be stressed. Those who have held office will know that the political agenda is largely driven by necessities, you do what you have to do, doing what you want to do is the luxury that creeps in round the corners. The Liberal Democrats made the sacrifice to necessities in 2010. They might have done it better; they might have taken guidance from our sister parties in Europe, though there was a sense of urgency at the time. There were clear own goals from the outset, but tuition fees is the mantra that sticks with the public when it comes to trust.

The DNA of the leadership was probably wrong; top down rather than bottom up. Over the preceding years, as Euro-scepticism grew in the Conservative party, the Liberal Democrats had absorbed many refugees from that party and attracted others who might otherwise have staked their careers elsewhere. There was a confluence of backgrounds with some of these and Cameron's Tories.

The Labour party (who would and could not have been a coalition partner) now recite austerity as an argument against the Liberal Democrats, yet the only thing that we know of the austerity policies that their Treasury orthodoxy would have followed in 2010 is that they would have increased the rate of VAT immediately after the election. What we have seen of the Tories post-Coalition is that the Liberal Democrats were a moderating force, though as the junior partner shared the consequences; but did Danny Alexander have to deliver the message on Sunday mornings?

## CONSTANTLY OUTMANOEUVRED

Inexperienced, the Liberal Democrats were constantly out manoeuvred by the Tories and at the mercy of a hostile media.

According to the authors, the post-Coalition Liberal Democrats have been bystanders. As someone who voted for the Coalition, I saw it as a gamble that coalition might be seen to work in British politics, as it does across Europe. I anticipated the risk – wipe out at the next general election, witnessing the fate of

*“That was and is the problem; too few people running around trying to do too much, periodically kicked in the groin by the leadership or its machine”*

junior partners successively in Irish politics. One might have hoped for recovery at the following general election. To my mind that did not happen primarily because of the Corbyn factor, but the authors clearly state the toxicity that the Liberal Democrat brand had attained.

Prince of Fools, Cameron called the referendum; in making it a Tory platform, it is said that he anticipated an on-going coalition after the 2015 general election, with Clegg exercising a veto. In the 1975 Common Market referendum only two constituencies voted 'no'. In 2016 Scotland voted Remain,

Liberal Wales was split, the West Country, with the exception of South Hams and the Bath-Bristol-Cheltenham-Mendip area, voted heavily Leave.

Since Scotland was favouring Independence over Home Rule, the conclusion is that the Liberal Democrats are losing their demographic in the Celtic Fringe and are increasingly a party of the south, if not south east of England. Party membership figures would probably tell you that anyway. Six of the then eight Liberal Democrat seats voted Remain. One point the authors raise in the context, particularly of the South West is that the infinitely better resourced Tories ran a decapitating strategy over a sustained period of time, leading to an 18% point decline in the Liberal Democrat vote. Watch out for this again, wherever you are; the Tory machine is already fighting the next general election.

The 2019 general election was flawed by over-targeting: too many seats with too few resources, most notably the haemorrhaging of key activists during the Coalition.

Could Jo Swinson have been prime minister? Buoyed up by the Euro-elections, facing Leave leaderships in both Labour and the Conservatives, might she have been the optimum person to lead a Remain consensus among MPs from either of those parties?

Too sophisticated an argument to be sure and no sign that it was going to happen. Over the course of the elections in that year, I estimated that we delivered some 70,000 leaflets across the constituency, mostly on a targeted basis, without counting the work that we did in nearby target seats, neither of which were held nor regained as the nation got Brexit done. The esprit de corps did continue into 2020 until the Covid-19 Lockdown struck. It remains to be seen how much damage Covid-19 did to the Liberal Democrats, 868 councillors were elected in May 2023, a net gain of 214, perceptively in areas of strength.

One of the core chapters in this book is The Changing Geography of the Liberal Democrat Vote.

Most of it is uncomfortable reading, though necessary. I presume that the authors did have the advantage of the May 2023 elections. North Shropshire is the most recent Parliamentary by-election indexed

and the most recent article by the authors' cited is Orpington all over again; why the North Shropshire electoral earthquake means the Liberal Democrats have turned the corner on the road back to electoral recovery. But don't get buoyed up by that; we know what the Liberal Democrats can do in by-elections. Consider the previous. Will Chesham & Amersham kick-start a Liberal Democrat revival? Not until the party unites its old and emerging electoral geographies; the title says it all. The authors discount the Blue Wall, but see potential progress in non-Blue Wall previously held seats that the Tories. There is nothing surprising in the analysis leading up to this, but it's worth reading for the detail, particularly in building on the Remain vote. The Unionist vote in Scotland may be more difficult; David Torrance's *A History of the Scottish Liberals and Liberal Democrats* gives more guidance on the art of herding cats.

Comfort can be drawn from the evidence that traditional campaigning strategies – Focus, surveys, personal contact, still appear to work, despite the diminished activist base. They appear to have little impact on postal voter turn-out but do impact on the turn-out of other voters.

## CONSERVATIVE MIMICS

However, the Conservative machine has been very effective in mimicking these techniques, particularly given their financial advantages – paid for deliveries for example. Outside of the context of this book, it should be noted that the Green party (note, not Greens, we are Greens too) can be highly effective in delivering carbon-copy electioneering techniques, reminiscent of those we pioneered in the 1970s and 80s.

We had something of a test of the Tory machine in a local by-election in 2022. We got out two leaflets, a postal vote letter and an eve-of-poll, plus a special covering a planning application. There was limited canvassing, but local issues were picked up and the weekend before the poll, there were two Tory MPs and their spads out canvassing. Our polling day operation was a useful dry run of using Connect, but we had insufficient manpower to run polling stations all day. The Tories spot-leafleted their supporters only (very useful) and there was undoubtedly much invisible activity. Turn-out was up dramatically and they held the ward..

The book's commentary on the digital campaign in 2019 is mostly new to me. Around that time my local constituency was making good progress in that field, we had people who knew what they were doing, This broke down during Covid-19 as key jobs meant activist time was no longer available. We also used Facebook advertising. Unfortunately, the ageing white males that are left post-Covid have little or no idea of how to go about all this and need constant reminders to like and share. I wasn't aware of the Facebook Ad-Bank, but I may be as much of the communication problem as the party (most of whose emails I delete without opening for want of time).

The authors, again, underline this – lack of technical ability and lack of money to compete when the big parties join in. Add to this the need for better coordination between the national and the local, particularly in target seats.

The conclusions make a reassessment of the seven

themes identified by the authors and look to ways forward; since I'm not sure what the relationship of two of the authors is with the party, if any, so their advice is generous, of which some follows.

“Long-term prospects may depend on a slow realignment of the party vision rather than short-term electoral contingency.”

“Being on the left of the spectrum might persuade Labour sympathisers to lend their vote... especially pertinent in the Blue Wall.”

“On the other hand, there is a constituency of ‘One Nation’ Tories who might vote Liberal Democrat if neo-liberal dominance in Conservative ranks persists.”

“Davey's cautious approach... benefitted in the death-knell of the Johnson premiership... [but since] need[s] to express a more compelling vision...”

“re-empower the local.”

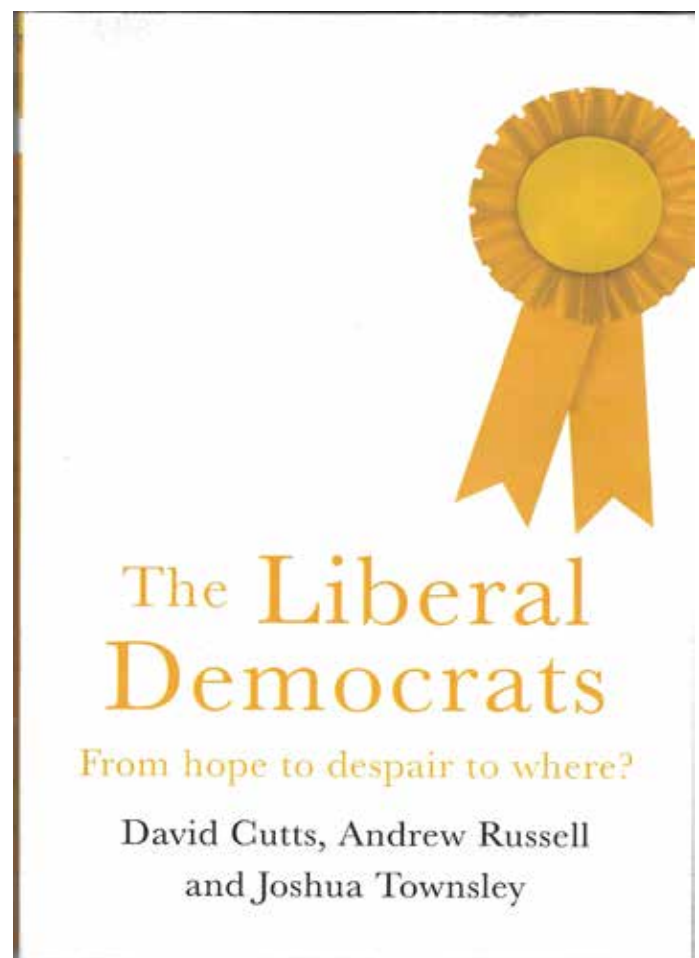
“Flirtations with economic liberalism have not been good for the party's fortunes... a permanent socially liberal identity... might make sense electorally...”

Hasn't Liberator been saying these things all along?

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Stewart Rayment is a member of the Liberator Collective and a Liberal Democrat member in Hastings.

The Liberal Democrats, from hope to despair to where? By David Cutts, Andrew Russell and Joshua Townsley. Manchester University Press 2023.



# DOUBLE STANDARDS

## Why are only certain people legally resident in the UK entitled to vote, asks Suzanne Fletcher

I was asked a question by someone who had fled to this country for safety from Niger Republic, who arrived in the UK as an asylum seeker, and had been given leave to remain here.

He is passionately involved in our community, works hard, wants to be able to have his say in who his democratic representatives are where he now lives, in his new adopted country. But he cannot, and wants to know what the Liberal Democrats are going to do about it?

But to be allowed to do this he has to be either a Commonwealth citizen, or have gone through a tortuous and expensive (over £1,000) process to eventually become a British Citizen. A process that cannot begin till a person has been resident here for at least 5 years. A 'life in the UK' test, costing £50 each time, must be passed too. I wonder how many of us that have lived in the UK all our lives, including our legislators, could pass that test? Could MPs and peers making decisions about their lives?

When I was mayor of our borough a favourite role was in celebrating the granting of citizenship. This was to many and varied people, at different stages of their lives. For some, often professionals, it was for people who had lived and worked in the UK for many years and just wanted to be able to have a British passport. They were pleased, and why not.

For those who had come here as asylum seekers, and finally had their case believed by our government, were given leave to remain, jumped through the hoops, it was a cause for great celebration and delight.

However one of the first things they wanted to do was to register to vote. They were keen to use it as part of becoming part of being part of the community, as well as what so many of those seeking sanctuary here in Stockton do in enriching our community. But that is what they do regardless of having British citizenship or even leave to remain. There is no logic at all as to who can and cannot vote.

However, if the country they had fled from happened to be in the Commonwealth, then they could register to vote as soon as they got leave to remain.

Why the difference? I don't know, maybe some readers do, but to me it smacks of deferring in the colonial age for reasons we would not accept today. Apparently that right was examined by a select committee in 1982 and they saw no reason to change it. Well, the world has moved on, and tragically more people are coming to the UK from different countries, so surely it is time to look again.

Surely someone who has fled their country because of war, tyranny, fear for their lives, and come here for safety and to build a new life for themselves should have the same rights to have their say on who their local councillor, police commissioner, elected mayor, and member of parliament is? So many have come from countries where there is no democracy and have

had to flee because of campaigning for such.

I have met some who have had to flee for fear of their lives for just handing out leaflets for an opposition party. The right to vote is very high on their priorities, and something to be treasured and used.

You can if from India, but not Iran; Antigua but not Afghanistan; Pakistan but not Palestine.

The whole of the UK has this outdated rule for general elections, but in Scotland and Wales anyone who is 'legally resident' can vote for all but their Westminster MP (and in Wales not for their PCC). Those democratically elected to positions in Scotland and Wales may have their problems, but they are not caused by those who are not British citizens and who are 'legally resident'.

I note that in Scotland those who have less than 12 months to serve in prison have the right to vote for all but general elections too. Surely, we believe in rehabilitation of offenders, and giving prisoners on short sentences a say in the community that they will be released into is part of giving them a say and some hope in the future.

As a party we believe in proportional representation, so that everyone's vote can count. We believe in scrapping voter ID so that needless bureaucracy does not make it more difficult to vote; We believe in votes for those who are 16 years old so that young people can have a stake in their future.

Surely everyone should be treated equally no matter where they happen to be from? So why do we not campaign for the right to vote for all who are legally resident in the UK, or are you going to tell me that we now are?

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Suzanne Fletcher is a former civic mayor and councillor of Stockton Borough Council and past chair of Liberal Democrats for Seekers of Sanctuary.

# WHAT LABOUR WON'T SAY

## Labour is being timid on tax. What about taxing earned and unearned income the same, asks William Tranby

Observers of the Labour Party leadership would note an overwhelming caution when developing policy choices for the next general election.

Kier Starmer has rowed back on a number of policy promises, and only his deputy Angela Rayner has come up with a package of employment and labour relations policies which restore some sense of what the party was supposed to be about. The Labour party should do what its name stands for, and provide support for working men and women.

But there is an obvious further consequence from restoring the value of well-paid and secure employment to underpin the dignity of working people. And that is to challenge the presumption that income from employment should be taxed more heavily than income gained from assets.

This is the elephant in the room of our tax system. Why should owning an asset provide you with a more generous tax regime than doing 35 hours a week in a job? Capital gains tax, inheritance tax, dividend tax, earnings from renting out property, or earnings from patents are all dealt with differently, with different allowances and different tax rates.

They are all forms of income but are not taxed the same as earned income from employment.

Shadow chancellor Rachel Reeves has ruled out introducing a wealth tax for the top 1%, much to the annoyance of her party's left wingers. But what she is not saying is whether she would reform any of the existing tax regimes for asset holders.

If she wanted to be really radical, she would declare that all income, whatever its source, should be taxed through a single income tax regime. This could also embrace the anomaly of National Insurance, which is the UK's second income tax in all but name.

The only positive thing about NI contributions is that the payments qualify the payer for a state pension. However, Tories are messing around with the starting point for paying NI, which means they are deliberately reducing the eligibility of some low paid or part-time workers from ever receiving the new state pension. Choosing an alternative eligibility criterion would be easily done. Payments of income tax over 35 qualifying years could work just as well. So merging income tax and NI into one tax would be a major first step.

Adopting a policy of having one tax allowance for all income could increase the amount of notional NI actually received into the Treasury, as it would capture additional contributions charged against income from assets.

Taxing all income against a single income allowance would be a second step that would simplify the tax regime, and having a single rate of tax with progressively higher bands for higher earners can remain in place.

The effect of the new regime on inheritance tax would be massive. No allowance of the first £325,000 being tax free would get the Tories screaming. Their latest ploy in defending the status quo is to argue that the assets built up by the deceased have already been taxed so inheritance tax should be scrapped. But this misses the point entirely. It is not a tax on the estate but a tax paid by those who inherit unearned income – the clue is in its title. It is as laughable as arguing that after a company pays its corporation tax and distributes some of the residual profit to shareholders, the latter should not pay dividend tax on their unearned income because the profits have already been taxed.

The one guarantee on inheritance tax which I would retain is for any principal property owned by the deceased should transfer automatically to a living partner or co-owner(s) without charge, or if owned solely by the deceased, to a named family beneficiary in the will. Further properties should form part of the estate and all inheritors should pay income tax on their unearned income through inheritance.

Capital gains tax and dividend tax should have the same treatment. All income from holding or selling assets, including second homes should be taxed in the same way as earned income. I would retain the tax allowance regime for pension contributions but only at the basic rate, and a further debate may be necessary on how one would treat the current cash free lump sum one can take on retirement.

I suspect that the increasing revenues to the Treasury by creating such a simple tax code would not only boost investment in public services but would also allow a future chancellor to lower the standard unified tax rate, which would start at 32% by initially combining NI and income tax. How far any chancellor cuts this new tax rate is one of those 'not so difficult decisions' to take after equalising the tax regime between earned and unearned income.

Is Reeves brave enough to embrace any of this agenda? My guess is she won't admit to anything along these lines until she is in the Treasury. After "studying the books" she will then declare that as the Tories made such a mess, serious reforms are now needed.

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William Tranby is a member of the Liberator Collective



# STUCK IN THE SLOW LANE

## Support for a blanket 20mph speed limit is just one of the Liberal Democrats' policy blunders in Wales, says Peter Black

When I was elected to Swansea Council in 1984, I was the only Welsh Liberal councillor, sandwiched between a dominant Labour group and a substantial group of Tories. My response was to find some distinctive issues, to raise the party's profile and work to get more councillors elected.

I understand, therefore, how hard it can be as the only Lib Dem on the Welsh Senedd, and as a member myself for 17 years, I know how difficult it can be to get our message across.

Despite this, it is possible to establish a clear and distinctive presence if approached in the right way.

No party has a clear majority in the Senedd. That means that the Labour administration is reliant on others to get their business through. They have an understanding with Plaid Cymru, but that does not always stand up, and so there is an opportunity for the Welsh Liberal Democrats' leader Jane Dodds to obtain concessions we can campaign on.

My beef is that when that situation has arisen, negotiations have apparently been cursory, and we have sold our support cheaply. If we have got anything for the Welsh Liberal Democrat vote, it has not been broadcast to the rest of the world, nor has the wider party been given any background briefing through private social media and other channels.

And then there is the legislation to introduce a default 20mph speed limit on all Welsh roads. The general view is that this is fine in urban areas near schools and hospitals, but that the speed limit on a large number of roads has been wrongly downgraded.

That is an opinion supported by many Welsh Liberal Democrat activists and members and a petition has attracted more than 461,400 signatures. Many of us want to campaign on this, but we can't because the new speed limit was supported by Dodds in the Senedd, without any communication with members as to why, or any consultation on her approach.

There are, of course, campaigning opportunities available on this issue in the way councils implement the change and introduce exemptions, but it always comes back to the fact that we supported this unpopular and frankly ludicrous measure, imposing changes from the top down rather than allowing them to develop locally according to the individual circumstances. That would have been a more liberal approach.

The other issue is the expansion of the Senedd from 60 members to 96. Current party policy is that we should increase the number of MSs to 80 or 90, with the accepted wisdom being 80 because the chamber has been designed to be easily expanded to accommodate that number. There is in fact a good case to do that.

The case for 96 is less clear. It is an arbitrary number put in place to enable a closed list system based on the 32 Westminster constituencies. The idea is to group these into 16 Welsh Senedd constituencies, each electing six MSs by the D'hondt system from closed party lists.

The instincts of many Welsh Liberal Democrats is to oppose this proposal as there is no justification for so many members. It is too expensive at a time when key budgets are being cut, while the proposed voting system puts too much power into the hands of party apparatchiks at the expense of voters.

Although our party leader is rightly continuing to argue for STV as the required voting system, she has thrown her hat in with the idea of 96 members, and when members question why, her office tells them that is party policy. It is not. Once more there is no communication or interaction with members to justify this stance.

All of this matters because our capacity for local campaigning has been curtailed. We currently only have 64 principal councillors speak across 13 of Wales' 22 authorities, having been effectively wiped out in South East Wales and the South Wales Valleys at the 2022 council elections. Our membership is also near rock bottom as well.

We need effective leadership from the Senedd on issues that matter to voters, and we need proper engagement with members, including the awkward buggers like me. If we don't take members with us in what our representatives are doing then we will lose them, and we will fall back further.

I understand that the main enemy at the moment is the Tories and that they hold Brecon and Radnorshire, the one constituency where we are competitive for the next general election, but there needs to be a recognition that many of us are up against Labour in our own areas.

When our sole national representative is seen to be repeatedly cosyng up to Labour, instead of effectively opposing them on key issues, when we are not using what leverage we have to get concessions that will benefit our constituents, and when we are left in the dark as to what is happening in the Senedd, with our queries being unanswered, we will continue to struggle to motivate activists. That must change.

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Peter Black is a former Liberal Democrat member of the Welsh Senedd

# OBITUARY: MICHAEL STEED

## David Grace pays tribute to psephologist and former Liberal president Michael Steed, who has died aged 83

I had known Michael Steed since I first became a Liberal in the 1970s. We all knew him and were familiar with his enormous knowledge of psephology, but I discovered that he had started young. An older colleague of mine had been at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, in 1959. On general election night the students had retired to the television room after dinner to find Michael seated front and centre with a table covered in charts and lists. As each result came in, Michael would quickly announce the swing. It became a contest to beat Bob McKenzie's swingometer and each time Michael was faster the room cheered..

My main memory of his term as president of the Liberal Party (1978-79) was when he was chairing party conference as we waited for the leader to appear. David Steel was late for some reason so Michael had to fill in. After a number of announcements he hit upon a great idea. He led the whole conference in singing *The Land*. What a pity we don't still do it.

In 1976 Michael was the main architect devising a system for all party members to elect the leader, when Jeremy Thorpe had to depart early. We were the first party to transfer this task from MPs to members, which has been disastrously followed by Labour and Tories.

It was perhaps understandable that a party with thousands of members but only 13 MPs made this change. There needed to be a minimum number of MPs to nominate a candidate for leader. Michael pointed out that under first-past-the-post a small change in the popular vote could dramatically increase the number of MPs so that a fixed percentage of MPs required to nominate could balloon into a large number. He therefore proposed that the minimum number of MPs required should be the nearest whole number to the square root of the total number, a formula which has not been copied elsewhere or indeed followed by the Liberal Democrats.

I invited Michael to a Young European Federalist seminar in Strasbourg to talk about nationalism. A group of staid Swedes drove Michael and me from the airport and were shocked when to illustrate his

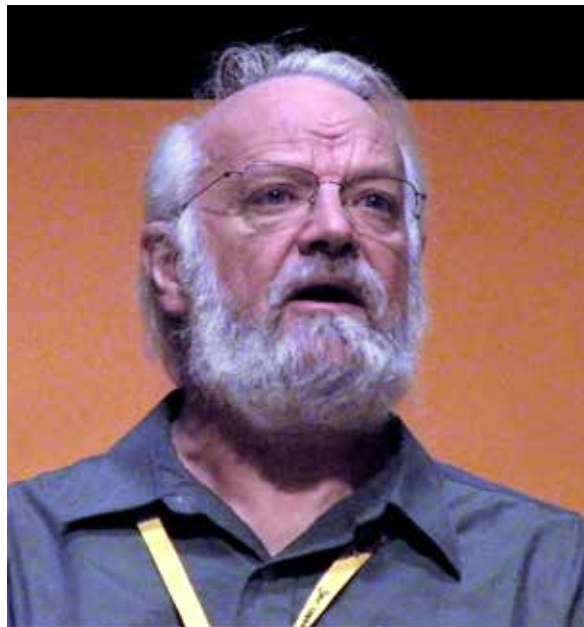
argument he burst into the rousing Irish Nationalist 'A Nation Once Again'. His lecture, which included references to the Jesuit theocracy in South America, was very well-received by an audience all working in English as their second language. Many commented that his style was so clear they had been able to follow every point and sub-point. This would not have been the only occasion when Michael demonstrated his extensive knowledge and his clarity in spreading it.

More specifically Michael's store of psephological expertise not only served to provide the statistical analysis in David Butler's regular Nuffield election studies but enabled him to overcome Conservative arguments when boundary changes were being considered. The Tories had hired a barrister with a huge pile of tomes containing precedents to appear before the Boundary Commission. As the lawyer recited case after case Michael - with no books at all - explained in detail why that precedent did not apply to the change they were discussing. When the barrister had exhausted

his pile of precedents all of which Michael had effectively shown to be irrelevant, the chair asked the man sarcastically: "Do you have any more books?"

Elsewhere ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael\\_Steed](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_Steed) you can find a complete record of Michael's political and academic record) but I must mention his championship of three causes, the European Union, UK constitutional reform and homosexual equality.

He also campaigned tirelessly to improve the party. As one of the young radicals of the 1970s (which Jo Grimond called his 'red guards') Michael demanded "...the party must shift attention away from personalities to a wide-ranging debate about ideology, principles and policies." Sounds familiar, doesn't it?



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David Grace is a member of the Liberator Collective

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## Why Employee Share Ownership Matters

by Michael Mainelli & Simon Mills

### Long Finance & ESOP Centre 2022

The old Liberal party had a proud legacy on industrial policy; this seemed to be abandoned with merger, but much of the 1928 Yellow Book, Britain's Industrial Future, would come to pass.

Those elements that had yet to be achieved in industrial democracy remained as major planks in party policy and certainly attracted many members. At their autumn conference, the Liberal Democrats debated 'Bring Back the Industrial Strategy'. Paradoxically the motion failed to mention industrial democracy, co-operatives, or even trades unions. Some mistake surely? The word 'worker' doesn't appear once. Are they so blinded by the failed neoliberal experiment?

Why Employee Share Ownership Matters is a short succinct argument for its cause, reflecting on the present state of play. You may be familiar with [Alderman] Prof Mainelli [Lord Mayor of London 2023-24] from Paddy Ashdown Foundation meetings; the authors argue that employees share ownership can be a tool in social mobility and meets UN Sustainable Development Goals for reducing inequalities.

The publication is also available to download from <https://www.zyen.com/publications/professional-articles/why-employee-share-ownership-matters/>

And a recording of the launch presentation and Q&A session can be viewed at

<https://fsclub.zyen.com/events/esopcentre-events/why-employee-share-ownership-matters/>

Z/Yen host regular webinars on aspects of economic and business policy so it is well worth keeping an eye on their offerings.

Employee share ownership is only one tool in smooth industrial relations and the structural policies of the old party may well be beneficial in what appears to be an era of increasing strikes; but it is a start and one that shouldn't frighten the rabbits.

Sayyed Rahman



# REVIEWS

## Artist of Wonderland, the life, political cartoons, and illustrations of Tenniel by Frankie Morris Lutterworth Press 2022 £29.25

Cartoonists have a difficult relationship with the politicians who are their bread and butter. They must always view them with a measure of scepticism, searching for moments of hypocrisy, insincerity, venality, and self-interest. John Tenniel was the chief illustrator for Punch from 1850 to 1901. The magazine's political allegiances varied in Victorian times. Even when with us, Punch would offer the corrective, an Englishman first, a Liberal second. Tenniel gradually took over the drawing of the weekly big cut, which framed political opinion. A Conservative by nature, the big cut was arrived at collectively by the Punch staff, before its execution by Tenniel and generally he was loyal to their decision.

Whilst like some politicians of today who should best be forgotten, Dizzie was a natural gift to any cartoonist, the Grand Old Man would gain Tenniel's respect, though he would differ with Gladstone on many issues – Irish Home Rule, not least. Gladstone for his part must have suffered Tenniel. He once wrote to him "I cannot say that I have ever seen a merely amusing caricature of myself."

Tenniel's big cut was likely to set the tone of the political debate for the coming week. Early big cuts took up a whole page, often the front or back page, and were produced by woodcut. Any politician worth their salt is likely to be cast as a magician or thief (especially chancellors), but snuff the insult that they have the power to change things, the cartoonist can only inform opinion.

As Harry Truman put it, if you

can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen. The GOM could stand the heat, of course and to his credit, gave Tenniel his knighthood – the first cartoonist so honoured.

Gladstone would feature in many forms, but let us consider him as a parrot. Cartoonists frequently associate politicians with animals, consider Peter Brookes' Nature Notes in this day. Tenniel depicted the GOM in this way at least 19 times, particularly in 1886 on the Irish Question when a series of 15 satirised his attempts to form a coalition with various factions and parties to get his Home Rule Bill passed. The parrot homes in on Gladstone's eloquence and oratorical skills, but it is known for its mimicry; was Gladstone opportunistic and not always consistent in what he said or did? Look closely at the bird and you will see the Grand Old Man within.

Tenniel's views reflected the male middle class zeitgeist of his day and would not stand the test of the tiresome political correctness of today, anti-feminist, his Fenians are thugs and the Irish generally get a raw deal, Hibernia aside. Others are likely to be ridiculed or at least objects of fun, though less violently, they remain stereotypical. John Bull remains the bluff Englishman, a little overweight perhaps, but I suppose that is part of the stereotype – comfortably off.

Frankie Morris was born in 1927; little is known of her except that she joined the US Air Force, working as an illustrator and technical drawer. She continued working as an illustrator, though neither the British Library, nor the Library of Congress catalogues offer any further works. This opus grew from a Ph.D. thesis at the University of Virginia in 2005.

But none of this is what you really want to know; it is Alice that calls Tenniel's name to mind these days. Back in 2001 reviewing the Mervyn Peake illustrated Alice (Liberator 277), I wrote: "Everybody needs at least two Alices – Tenniel and

another. Tenniel is dark.”

Having known Alice since earlier childhood, I think my feeling at the time was that there were masterpieces within Tenniel’s work, but overall, he didn’t interest me that much; appreciation of the Victorians grows with distance. I’d read Alice many times, and since, to my own children and grew less concerned about the illustration. How wrong could I be? Having read Wakeling’s Lewis Carroll, the man and his circle<sup>2</sup>, I was aware that Carroll worked closely with Tenniel on the illustrations, but this was more the case of the author directing the artist. As an editor used to holding the metaphorical pistol to an artist’s head to get artwork delivered to my print schedule, I didn’t give too much thought to this. As I studied Morris on Tenniel and the Alice books, I began to question whether I had read them at all. The depth of collaboration between author and artist opened up wholly new perspectives; I shall have to read them again.

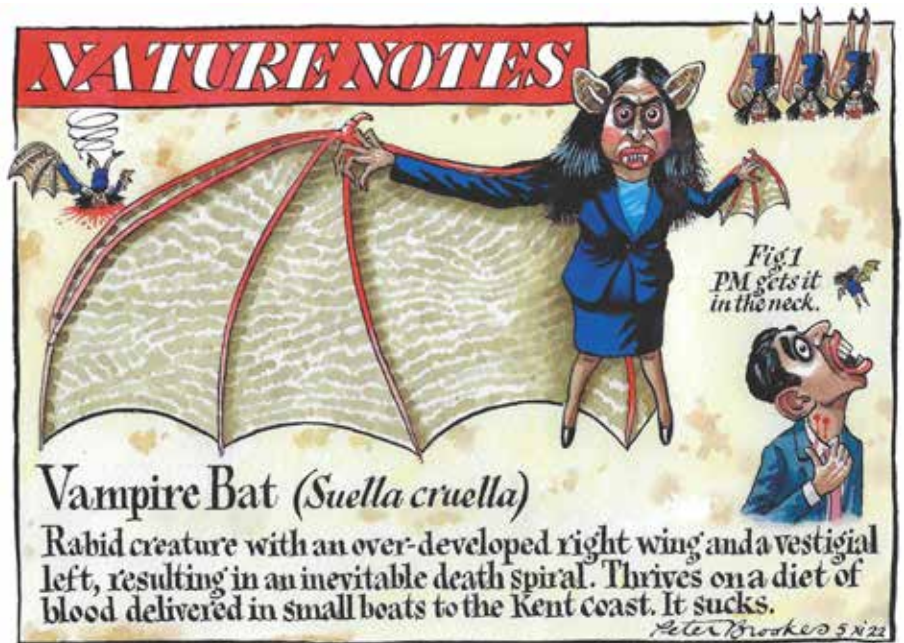
One particular insight that I will share; the caterpillar is Mr. Punch.

Miller has done us a great service in this book. If you are interested in John Tenniel you have a thorough biography, likewise if you are interested in the magazine Punch, not quite from its inception on 17 July 1841, but through to the end of that century. The development of print technology as used by the magazine through the last half of the 19th century is well covered. Romp through British history, at home and in foreign fields and other major international events. But most of all look at Tenniel’s collaboration with Carroll in the Alice books, which you’ll want to read again, with Miller close at hand.

Stewart Rayment

## Torrid Times by Peter Brookes Biteback 2023 £30.00

Peter Brookes is 80. He has been informing and entertaining us in The Times since 1992 but has been working from home since the Covid lockdown. He has survived six changes of editor, as Nick Newman said opening his exhibition at Chris Beetles Gallery, even the great Gerald Scarfe was eventually sacked by the Sunday Times. Peter



said that The Times had always given him a free hand, even when he was against their editorial line, he was against the Iraq war from the outset, and currently on migration, he felt that the paper gave a little bit of headroom to Suella Braverman, thinking she says things that need to be said, whereas he thought she didn’t need to say anything. Children of immigrants themselves, he found both Braverman and Patel, her predecessor, disgraceful in their lack of empathy and compassion.

Nick, the Sunday Times pocket cartoonist, went on to say that whereas the pocket cartoonist relies on humour, the political cartoonist produces what he described as a chin-stroker, adding that Peter’s great success is that he is able to combine humour with the chin-stroker; if in doubt, seek out a small detail in one of his works that you missed the first time.

Torrid Times covers the period July 2021 to June 2023, so we have Covid 19, Partygate and its aftermath – the short premiership of Liz Truss and even shorter career of her chancellor, Kami-Kwasi Kwarteng, Ukraine, the cost-of-living crisis and the fundamental racism of the party that has assumed the name ‘Conservative’. Brookes is an angry man; seeing his collected work brings this home. But it is not just anger at what may be the worst period of British government ever, he is angry with the strikers taking advantage of this situation with no regard for rest of us; nurses have a case, but he discounts the rest of them.

Everybody, the subject matter excluded, should be pleased to find this in their Christmas, Hannukah or whatever stocking. If you want an original, they market at £1,450.00, or £2,750.00 for Nature Notes, from Chris Beetles Gallery - <https://www.chrisbeetles.com/artists/brookes-peter-born-1943.html> where you can also find the work of Nick Newman.

Stewart Rayment

## The Interview: Princess Diana and the duplicitous Martin Bashir by Jonathan Maitland Park Theatre London

In November 1995, the BBC aired an interview between Princess Diana (Yolanda Kettle) and journalist Martin Bashir (Tibu Fortes). It was watched by hundreds of millions worldwide.

This play follows the lead-up to the broadcast and its aftermath, and raises questions about journalistic ethics.

It sets the scene with a recording of King Charles admitting in a BBC interview that he had been unfaithful to Diana during their marriage.

The first act shows how Bashir is determined to secure a TV interview with Diana, and his devious ploys. Fortes gives an enthusiastic performance as Bashir, as he inveigles his way to gain Diana’s confidence and weaken her already fragile trust in the royal family. They are both



misfits, he tells her, and gains her sympathy by describing his sorrow over his brother's death.

Diana's friend Luciana has misgivings about the interview, and suggests she use the opportunity to look magnanimous and forgive Charles. However, Diana becomes convinced the interview will allow her, finally, to tell her story.

Bashir, meanwhile, remains resolute, pushing graphic designer Matt Weissler (Ciarán Owens) into forging bank statements – but does not tell him he wants these to gain the trust of Diana's brother.

The second act debates journalistic ethics and the truth. We're taken to the editing suite, where BBC staff review the interview footage, bluntly debating what should and should not be broadcast, and what they find to be the most striking lines. Only the best-known lines from the interview – “there were three of us in the marriage” – are included in the play.

Then, it's 25 years later, and Bashir's duplicitous methods are being found out and questions raised about the ethics of broadcasting the interview, if the end justified the means, fake news and whether the BBC should be making rather than reporting the news.

Hypocrisy is evident throughout, whether from the BBC staff (marvellous), the unrepentant Bashir and even Paul Burrell (Matthew Flynn), who highlights his own book about Diana. The chemistry between the characters on the minimal set, from Bashir

and Diana to the sometimes hypocritical BBC staff, gives an intimacy to the production. Both Diana and Burrell very much look the part.

Under pressure from Prince William, the BBC agreed it would never broadcast the interview again. While you can understand the prince's motives, the move served to silence both a part of TV history and Diana herself. (However, the interview can be found online easily enough.)

Nonetheless, the genie was out of the bottle. Bashir's underhand methods undermined the programme's integrity – but shone a harsh light on life in the royal family.

Christy Lawrance

### **The Battle of Cable Street** by Tanya Landman, illustrated by Sara Mulvanny Barrington Stoke 2022 £7.99

The Battle of Cable Street, 1936 was an affray between the police and various Jewish and left-wing groups, most notably in my recollection, the Independent Labour Party (ILP), preventing a march by Sir Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists through a part of Stepney.

It has been mythologised by the socialist left, but most notably, the Labour party issued an instruction to its members not to be there; many of course, ignored this. There

were undoubtedly Liberals present, given our relationship with the Jewish community at the time, but details are not known to me. James Kiley had held Whitechapel & St. Georges against a Coalition Unionist in 1918. Barnett Janner held the seat from 1931-1935. Hhe was defeated at that general election, standing as a Liberal and Anti-Fascist; he later became a Labour MP and Peer, but his wife Elsie joined the SDP on its foundation).

Bethnal Green remained a stronghold, but I do not recall any reference to the event in Liberal MP Sir Percy Harris's autobiography, for example. Some of the activists that I met 40-50 years later had a record of anti-fascist activity through the 1970s onwards, but none of us were born in 1936.

Tanya Landman's story is told through the eyes of two young kinderlech who gravitate to the Communist party and make their way to Cable Street, getting away by the skin of their teeth.

This book has a dyslexia-friendly layout, typeface and paperstock so that even more readers can enjoy it. It has been edited to a reading age of eight.

Stewart Rayment

### **The Loneliest Revolution, a memoir of solidarity and struggle in Iran** by Ali Mirsepassi Edinburgh University Press 2023 £14.99

Ali Mirsepassi is an exiled Iranian sociologist working in New York. His Iranian revolution ended sooner than most peoples had even began, when he spoke against Khomeini's diktat that student strikes in the universities should end (this was in October 1978, before the Pahlavis had fallen from power). Walking from the campus, he was jumped, beaten up and dumped for dead in a ditch. To this day, he doesn't know whether it was the Shah's secret police n SAVAK or Khomeini's supporters who carried out the attack.

My own Iranian revolution was a rather more placid affair. Iranian students comprised the second largest group of overseas

students at the LSE at the time – around 400-500. Their Friday prayers were something to behold as they gathered en masse and it was obvious to the rest of us that something was up. I had Iranian friends, we would discuss Hegel into the small hours of the morning, but never touched on their homeland politics; I wonder where they are now? I decided that keeping in touch would be a risk for them as events rolled out.

One day, I happened upon a book on the pavement outside the Holborn tube station, picked it up and discerned that it was Iranian. On reaching the school, I joined some colleagues who were selling Liberal News on the steps of the Old Building – a regular Friday lunchtime activity, to wind up the various Trots, Sparts and other socialist factions selling their rags.

I showed my colleague the book, and joked that it was probably a SAVAK hitlist of all the Iranian activists they were watching in London. As if by magic, a well-dressed Iranian man, probably in his thirties, emerged from the crowd and asked to see the book (he was obviously monitoring the Iranian students at prayer). He examined the book and told me that it was by Mosaddegh and related to the nationalisation of the oil industry; it was of course, wrong. I told him that I would give the book to the library at the School of Oriental and African Studies, where it would probably be of more use

His work has focussed on the anti-western Nativist philosophy of Ahmad Fardid, one of the ideologues of the Iranian revolution and much of his book charts the road to that position. Echoed throughout, it is clear that a secular, let alone left-wing Iranian revolution was out of the question. Too many key players were either in prison or dead. This raises the question of where current opposition in Iran might go; the fear being that it is too dissipated.

Stewart Rayment

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## **The Party and the People: Chinese Politics in the 21st Century** by Bruce Dickson Princeton University Press

When Bruce Dickson wrote the introduction of his book *The Party and the People: Chinese Politics in the 21st Century*, he humbly admitted: “This book was not my idea. I would not have written it were it not for Eric Crahan, then the political science editor at Princeton University Press”.

Yet I must humbly admit, this is a really good book on explaining how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ran the country, the ideology of the party, and how it interacted with or repressed other stakeholders in the country.

The author clearly said, he wanted to explain one of the core aspects of CCP ideology is being responsive (hence, in his words, responsive to their superior, not accountable to the people), and how they run the country under this principle.

As he said, “much of the research on contemporary Chinese Politics is published in scholarly outlets that are not easily accessible to more general readers”. In this aspect, I think he succeeded. In general, the book is very well balanced in evaluating factionalism and party ideology in the decision-making and personnel appointment processes.

I particularly adore one key idea in chapter three: the Chinese Communist Party is a fragmented authoritarianism. In his words: “The Chinese state is not a unified actor; political authority is fragmented. It is fragmented vertically, in the sense that decisions made at higher levels are not always faithfully implemented at lower levels.

“Different levels of the political system have different priorities, based on the local context and the interests of local officials.”

“There is little question that policy making is under the control of the CCP, but the CCP is not a unified monolith.”

It is coincidentally similar to a key point I have been suggesting for some time. I’ve argued CCP is a collective of factions. The only difference is, the fragmented authoritarianism suggested

by Dickson is the issue of the institution within China, and the nature of the bureaucratic system; while I would argue the factions within CCP are more about personal interests or the interests of a group of people based on geographical or ideological difference, which reflected their sphere of political influence within CCP.

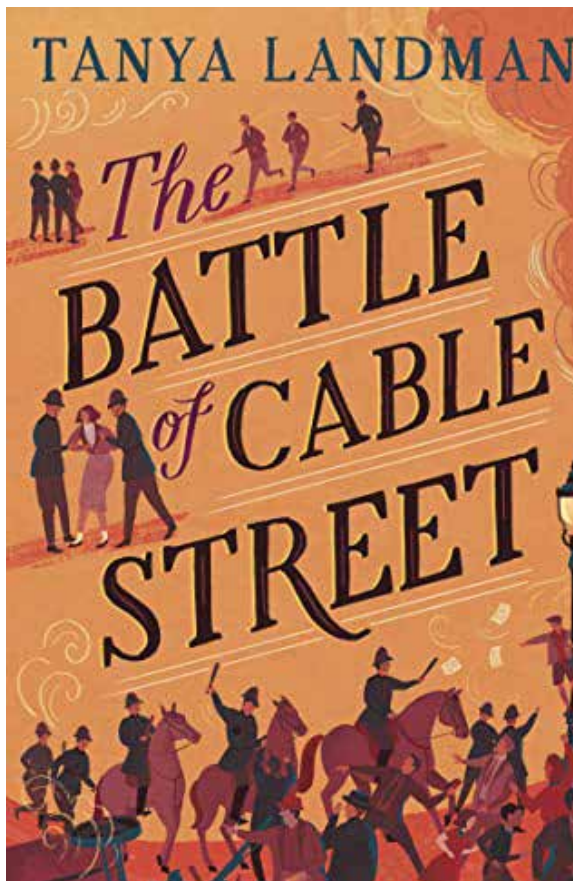
Another feature I liked about this book is that the author tried to use Western political science terminology to analyse CCP policies and attitudes towards other stakeholders in the country, such as civil society and religion but will take into account of the circumstances and historical factors facing China and made a few adjustments to his observations.

This book also covered a very important aspect which could be ignored by other political pundits in the Western world - how the difference between provinces and cities affected its approach towards civil society. For example, the provincial governments recognised the role of NGOs, the author compares provinces like Beijing and Yunnan would be more supportive of NGOs for various reasons. Beijing is the capital, and investment from international NGOs would promote China’s development; which, in turn, supports the CCP’s agenda. Yunnan is economically backwards with few resources “to meet the unfunded mandates on education, health care and other social welfare policies”. In contrast, regions like Shanghai would be more conservative in its approach to civil society and NGOs since the city relied more on state enterprises and state-led developments.

In the final chapter, the author attempted to answer a significant question raised by academia and political pundits since the 1990s: Will China become a democracy?

He analysed the hypothesis in political science and concluded that it is very unlikely China will become a democracy since the recipe for making it happen is just not available.

Dickson suggested three main models of democratisation: an elite led transformation, in which incumbent leaders initiate and preside over the transition; a bottom up replacement, in which a social movement challenges



and overthrows an authoritarian regime; a pacted transition, in which the incumbents negotiate with the political opposition over the terms of new regime.

Since the CCP has “proved it was willing to do whatever it takes to remain in power”, and in the absence of the criteria of the second and third models - namely an opposition leader who has broad social support; an organised political opposition; and a regime leader who is willing to abandon repressive tactics and negotiate the terms of regime change, these modes of democratisation are unlikely to happen.

Even if CCP fell, the author suggested, another authoritarian regime may replace the old order, as what happened in Egypt when Mubarak was overthrown.

Like most of the literature on China affairs, unfortunately, this book suffered from a few shortcomings. For example, when he analysed the case of Three Gorges Dam, he ignored the fact that the project was promoted by Li Peng, the former premier who propelled the whole idea and hastened the negotiations. I would propose that it was achieved through personal/factional influence within CCP, not negotiation and compromises among departments and provincial

governments.

One key aspect missing from this book is that the author did not analyse the role of Chinese history sufficiently. For example, while he used Chinese 19th-century history to explain the nationalist sentiment in China, he may not realise the whole issue is more deeply rooted than just 19th century history. The role of the Republic of China has also been overlooked since the modern nationalist sentiment was first to be shaped in the 1920s and 1930s: the Nationalist Party first formulated and implemented the nationalist sentiment within its Chinese history education curriculum. The CCP just inherited the system and implemented it even further.

Another notable aspect missing in this book,

to my surprise, is the lack of mention of the CCP’s United Front Work Department. It was only inadequately mentioned in an analysis of CCP policies on religious organisations. For most political pundits following China affairs, we would know the significance of the United Front Work Department, particularly how they infiltrated protest groups during the 2014 and 2019 Hong Kong protests, how it supported the developments of pro-establishment parties in Hong Kong before and after 1997 reunification, and its interaction with Nationalist Party in Taiwan.

Yet, even with these shortcomings, this book can still provide a good overview of how the CCP runs China, and how the CCP responded to different stakeholders in the country with a top down approach. Therefore I would recommend this book to anyone who is interested in China affairs.

Larry Ngan

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## Cell written & performed by Cindy Oswin

Cell is a one woman, one act play by Cindy Oswin on the life (or death) and thoughts of one woman, Julian of Norwich. I say death, because Julian was an anchoress,

a woman who was walled in a cell to live a life of prayer and contemplation, in this case 12 foot by 12 foot in the church of St Julian in King Street, Norwich.

She had contact with the rest of the world through three windows, to the church, for its rituals, to a servant for sustenance, and to the outside world, where she might advise passers by and spent maybe 40 years in this condition. Julian became an anchoress after a near fatal illness during the Black Death in 1373, indeed the last rites were administered. During her illness she had vivid shewings of the Passion of Christ. These and her later meditations were set down in her Revelations of Divine Love, a short version which may have been written shortly after her illness, and a longer version.

Revelations of Divine Love is significant in many ways. Contemporary with Geoffrey Chaucer, it is the first work known to have been written by a woman in English. As a work of medieval Christian mysticism, it may not have been unusual in its time, but would later be regarded as heretical, at least by the Roman Church. Julian regarded God as both Mother and Father, not a difficult concept, but in the face of increasing patriarchy in religion, controversial at times. Jesus is spoken of as a mother.

Oswin imagines this through the words of a volunteer tourist guide to the church (although the cell was destroyed during the Reformation, and the church itself was rebuilt after the Blitz). She talks at first to an imagined audience, somewhat world-wearily and then in an imagined dialogue with Julian herself.

Mother Julian is most famously remembered for her saying: “All shall be well, all shall be well, all manner of things shall be well.” This was Christ’s promise to her in the face of sin, the promise on which faith rests.

Cell can be watched on YouTube and more details can be found at <https://cindyoswin.com>

Stewart Rayment

## Monday

So Cameron has decided to emerge from his shed and become foreign secretary, nabbing himself a peerage in the process. You may remember him: face like a carved ham; used to be prime minister; decided he was a political genius and called a referendum to “settle the issue of Europe once and for all”. We have talked of little but Europe ever since. Cameron, incidentally, was the fellow Clegg was so keen on and with whom he shared fragrant moments in the Downing Street rose garden. That didn’t stop him sandbagging Clegg the moment he thought it to his advantage. There’s a moral there: if you’re going to sup with a Tory, make sure you bring a long spoon, a hard hat and an abdominal protector.

## Tuesday

The housing debate at Bournemouth, as you may have noticed, took a heated turn, and it behoves me to confess my part in the affair. I have for some years been in the habit of carrying with me a little bottle of the elixir sold by the Elves of Rockingham Forest – add a couple of drops of that to your hipflask and you’ll last through the dreariest all-night sitting. It so happened that I met Tim Farron in the refreshment queue before the debate and, discerning that he was in need of a tonic, handed him the bottle, saying: “Add a drop of that to your coffee and you’ll get a standing ovation.” At this point I was distracted by a couple of popsies who wanted to take selfies with me, and when I eventually turned back to Farron it was just in time to see him necking the last of the elixir. “Are you all right, Farron?” I asked concernedly, only for him to assure me that he felt “Flipping great”. He then stormed into the hall like a tiger that had just noticed an unattended lamb. You will remember what happened next – “Spawn of Thatcher,” “Beelzebub’s Brownies” and all the rest of it.

## Wednesday

I sit down with Rachel Reeves’s new book: “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife. Call me Ishmael. Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen. ‘Take my camel, dear,’ said my Aunt Dot, as she climbed down from this animal on her return from High Mass.” I toss the volume aside. Reeves is just repeating Shakespeare’s trick of putting a lot of famous quotations together and hoping nobody notices.

## Thursday

You may have read that Lily Gladstone, the star of *Killers of the Flower Moon* (‘Goes On A Bit’ – High Leicestershire Radical), is the great, great granddaughter of a cousin of the Grand Old Man and grew up on the reservation of the Blackfoot Nation until she was 11. For some reason, the historians rarely touch upon William Ewart Gladstone’s American Indian heritage, but I can reveal that Queen Victoria’s animus towards him was partly occasioned by his insistence on wearing a feathered headdress

# Lord Bonkers’ Diary

on state occasions and his habit of calling her “paleface” when she failed to agree with him. My own father told me that the occasional “heap big” cropped up in his conversation to the very end. All I shall add it is that it’s a great shame that the disputants of the Irish Question did not agree to “smoke um pipe of peace” when he urged the idea upon them.

## Friday

To London for the annual general meeting of the National Trust as I am seriously considering opening the gardens at the Hall to the public next year. The ill-feeling occasioned by the sudden closure of the Bonkers Hall Safari Park appears at last to have abated – really, you have one coachload of nuns involved in an unfortunate incident and you never hear the last – so perhaps it is time to dip a toe in the stately home racket again. I have brought Cook with me so she can place herself abreast of the latest developments in scone technology – the Wise Woman of Wing is all over the herbal tea market like a boss, so I need not worry about that side of things. Me? I am, at Meadowcroft’s insistence looking for information on security fencing – he keeps going on about the possibility of visitors harming his cherished Rutland flytrap. To be candid, I am more anxious to see that the thing does not get loose and give the gutter press something else with which to blacken my name.

First, however, come the results of the Trust’s internal elections and the news that the Duke of Rutland’s daughter, together with the rest of her miserable slate, has been defeated. Reader, I simply roared.

## Saturday

Libby, the Liberal Democrats’ mascot, is, as I have observed before, a foul-smelling bird of uncertain temper. When I give her the run of the Bonkers Hall Estate over the summer recess so she can breathe some fresh country air, it generally proves more of a duty than a pleasure. Of late, however, Libby has revealed an unexpected sense of humour. She has taken to impersonating a vulture and circling the skies above the constituency offices of Conservative MPs with small majorities. Already, more than one junior minister from Surrey has handed back his portfolio after being haunted by her. This evening I tell mine host at the Bonkers’ Arms all about her exploits in the hope he will reconsider his decision to bar her after that affair with the pickled eggs last year.

## Sunday

To St Asquith’s, where the Revd Hughes takes as his text Matthew 8:9: “For I am a man under authority, having soldiers under me: and I say to this man, Go, and he goeth; and to another, Come, and he cometh; and to my servant, Do this, and he doeth it.” All I can say is that whoever wrote that never employed Meadowcroft.

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