

# liberator



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## LIBERATOR

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# COMMENTARY

## A RARE OPPORTUNITY

For the first time in a long time an explicit Liberal Democrat general election strategy is being put to the test.

It was hard to dignify the shambles of 2019 as 'a strategy' and for two elections before that the party was concerned with damage limitation. In and before 2010 the party sought to hold what it had and make incremental gains.

One has to go back to 1997 to find a parallel with what is now being attempted as a great leap forward. It worked then, indeed the 46 seats were more than expected.

Will it work this time? The strategy is aimed at returning the party to third place in the House of Commons - an enterprise at least partly dependent on how badly the SNP does - and is not targeted, at least in England, on traditional ground.

In the past, the largest crop of seats in England was concentrated in the west country and despite the substantial Lib Dem vote in the south-east this region saw little attention and only odd gains such as Lewes and Guildford.

This time the target is clearly the newly-identified 'blue wall' in the south east and East Anglia in addition to the south-west.

There are of course seats elsewhere being targeted, but that is usually because they are already held, or recently have been, or some local factor applies.

Large swathes of the country are therefore not going to see a great deal of the Lib Dems; maybe a free postal delivery leaflet if they are lucky.

Those that hear from the Lib Dems will do so under the slogan A Fair Deal For All - and since no party is going to explicitly campaign for an unfair deal it will not be immediately clear what this means. The party has been stressing the NHS, water pollution and public services though saying little about Europe.

There appears to be on the assumption that those who care deeply about rejoining the EU will vote Lib Dem anyway (or at least will not vote Tory) while strong Brexit supporters will never vote Lib Dem and can be ignored.

Likewise with electoral reform, which Chris Bowers suggests in this Liberator has been mistakenly ignored. The assumption is that anyone who cares about it is in the bag.

Underlying all this of course is the message about the best way - in target seats - to remove the Tories being to vote Lib Dem.

When a Government has become as unpopular and chaotic as this one has, it is safe to assume that all but its most diehard supporters can be up for grabs and persuaded to help remove it.

Tactical voting is a necessity under the present voting system but it's a way of persuading people to vote against something but with little relationship to what the party stands for.

In 1997 it had been public for a while that Paddy Ashdown and Tony Blair were talking to each other about co-operation in government and that the Cook-Maclennan talks on agreed political reforms had taken place.

This time - unless things have stayed unusually secret - there has only been an informal agreement to keep out of each others way at by-elections (Mid Bedfordshire was an exception).

But suppose the polls are over-generous to Labour and there is another hung parliament. Do the Lib Dems know what to demand, what they would refuse and what model of co-operation they would entertain? Indeed, apart presumably from Ed Davey, do they know who would do the asking?

The disasters of 2010-15 must not be repeated and the party is understandably wary of any coalition. But a confidence and supply deal would be seen much the same in public in addition to putting the Lib Dems in the strange position of criticising Labour's actions while sustaining it in office. These questions are bound to arise from the media during the campaign and clear answers will be needed. In the current climate Davey will at least not have to pretend he is equidistant between Labour and the Tories.

Unless the polls are completely wrong we are looking at a Labour government on some basis, and soon or later that will become unpopular.

That will open up opportunities at local level in Labour areas which the Lib Dems may be ill-equipped to exploit given these have been abandoned while the party concentrates on the 'blue wall'. In 1997-2005 the Lib Dems largely defended their gains from the Tories while making substantial inroads into Labour territory. The party might have to re-learn pulling this trick off.

On election night in 2019 nobody in their right mind would have predicted that five years later the Tory party would be in ruins and substantial Lib Dem gains and a Labour government were likely.

The Tories' decline has been self-inflicted and presents an opportunity not seen for years. Good luck to all readers standing.

*4 July – climb every staircase!*

# RADICAL BULLETIN

## “A POLITICAL PARTY, M'LUD”

Someone has been leaking to the New European, a paper that chides the Liberal Democrats for being insufficiently outspoken about rejoining the EU, but is by national media standards fairly sympathetic.

Its Mandrake column reported in May that it had seen a party document that said legal bills totalling some £750,000 were heading Vincent Square's way.

Mandrake did not make it clear how this figure had been arrived at but said it reflected the long running Jo Hayes case (see innumerable Liberator back issues), and those of David Campanale and Natalie Bird, while also claiming that the party has already reached an out-of-court settlement with former Richmond councillor Avril Coelho.

For Campanale's case, see below. Coelho's Crowd Justice page claims she suffered various discriminations because of her disabilities and states that she was accused of bullying and harassment, which she denies. A statement on this site says: "If I don't proceed to trial it's because they make me an offer good enough compared to what I could change and make whether I win or lose."

Having served as a Richmond councillor Coelho stood unsuccessfully in her old ward as an independent in 2022 against official Lib Dem candidates, which is normally a sacking offence in itself.

Bird was banned from party office for a decade for wearing tee-shirt at conference with a slogan some thought transphobic, although others considered it innocuous.

Her case is listed in court in August with claims about breaches of the Equality Act, and the party is understood to be concerned that, even if it won, it would be unable to recover costs, Bird having been crowdfunded.

This concern is understood to also apply to the lengthy saga of the Hayes case, although as a barrister Hayes has for the most part represented herself.

Hayes was back in court in mid-April. There are two cases being pursued. One is against the party over her expulsion and the other trying to unmask people who engaged in possibly related online abuse.

For the latter case, Hayes sought to force the party to identify who might have been responsible by means of a legal process known as a Norwich Pharmacol order.

Lord Justice Warby though refused Hayes permission to appeal against the High Court's refusal to grant this, noting this "is available only where the person(s) whose identification is sought have arguably engaged in wrongdoing".

Her other case is - in essence - that her membership was revoked as a result of a complaints process that is not properly independent of the party's executive arm the Federal Board. This is illustrated by numerous examples which Hayes has chosen to support her case and which appear in public court documents but are too convoluted to go into here.

Meanwhile, a judge has struck out large parts of Hayes's claim as being extraneous to the main argument about

her expulsion, which may simplify future proceedings and reduce their costs.

This is unlikely to be the end of the cases brought by Hayes which, should they reach trial, may finally disclose what it is she is supposed to have done to merit expulsion.

## FAMILY AFFAIR

It is said one tell someone from the company they keep, and the company the Liberal Democrats keep has become dubious in two cases.

The Netherlands' VVD party faces a vote to kick it out of the Renew Europe grouping in the European Parliament after this month's elections because it has joined a coalition with the extreme right-wing and anti-Muslim PVV party.

Renew Europe is a grouping of the liberal ALDE - to which the Lib Dems still belong - and other liberal parties outside that but in the parliament.

There are also reports that Sweden's Centre party want to remove the Swedish Liberals for a slightly different reason - participating in a government externally propped up by the far right.

Proportional representation systems in other countries allow for multiple liberal parties and although the Lib Dems have long felt closer to D66 in the Netherlands, they have historically recognised the VVD as fellow liberals, if of a rather right-wing kind on economics.

The VVD has been in Liberal International since 1960 and the Swedish Liberals were a founder member in 1947. It is unclear what would happen there if Renew kicked out either or both.

## ORANGES AND LEMONS

How to best celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the Orange Book, the collected works of free-market zealots produced during Charles Kennedy's hands-off approach as leader to anything to do with policy?

Its birthday is being marked at the home of the most fringe of all free market headbangers, the Institute of Economic Affairs, which is also the final hang out of true believers in Liz Truss.

From the Lib Dems it boasts the participation of Vince Cable. Several other notable Lib Dems were asked but found more pressing engagements and they eventually chose as second speaker, er, Mark Oaten.

## HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT

Few Liberal Democrats are likely to be devotees of the Daily Telegraph given its role as the mouthpiece of the Conservative party.

They will therefore have missed a 2,500 words exposition of the case of David Campanale's ejection as candidate for Sutton & Cheam (Liberator 422), where a fresh parliamentary selection has resulted in local councillor Luke Taylor becoming prospective candidate.

The thrust is that Campanale believes he was removed for



being a Christian, a claim the party countered by pointing to the number of practising Christian candidates in nearby seats, including Ed Davey.

Campanale's complaints have been sent to the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) together with, according to the Telegraph, "accusations that the party has tolerated a 'hostile environment' for people of faith, failed to investigate serious allegations of discrimination and harassment and "emboldened those who believe Christians should be driven out of public life".

Objections to Campanale centred on his role - in between his two bouts of Lib Dem membership - as leader of the highly socially conservative but not very successful, Christian People's Alliance.

The Telegraph also said members of the Liberal Democrat Christian Forum - though by implication not the organisation itself - had written to party president Mark Pack to complain about Campanale's treatment.

He has gained support from former MP Simon Hughes and Jonathan Marks KC, justice spokesperson in the House of Lords.

Sutton members who moved against him felt they should have been informed about Campanale's past before he was selected.

## SEASIDE SHUFFLE

On 20 May the Lib Dem Federal Board decided the possible imminence of a general election meant party conference should be cut back to Saturday-to-Monday only. Two days later the general election was called, making this unnecessary. Four days later the conference was restored to its normal length.

One little noticed feature of this was that the truncated conference would have been a special conference rather than a normal one, at which power to set the agenda would consequently have rested with the FB, not the Federal Conference Committee. This was no doubt a device to ensure that anything faintly controversial could be kept off the agenda.

Notice of the reinstated conference merely says the FB has "asked FCC to plan in opportunities for members to give feedback on the general election campaign at conference".

## PRIMARY PURPOSELESS

The row over Lib Dem Carol Voaden's participation in the South Devon primary election (Liberator 422) appears to have deterred others from these events.

These were promoted by something called the Political Primary Network and intended to allow the public to coalesce behind one non-Tory candidate as chosen at a public meeting, though without anyone standing down.

Dire warnings were issued by the party to Voaden but she still entered and indeed won the process, which made following up on threats to remove her both pointless and embarrassing.

One prominent agent told Liberator: "It is now clear that [primaries] are a legal nightmare for the successful candidate and agent. Presumably that's why Labour has pulled out of them too."

Political Primary Network's website lists five active primaries: East Wight, Melksham & Devizes, Newton Abbott, North West Essex and Horsham, with a further three 'launching soon' in Mid Buckinghamshire, Mid Sussex and Torbay.

These appear to have been overtaken by events but with neither Lib Dem nor Labour participation will the Green candidates debate with themselves at these meetings?

## A CASS FOR CONFUSION

When Dr Hilary Cass's report on gender identity services for children and young people was published in April, the first official Lib Dem comment came from Baroness Greider, who was coincidentally appearing on the LBC phone-in programme Cross Talk, who called the report broadly good and broadly welcome and emphasised the need for talking therapies.

Next up was a negative statement about Cass from Lib Dem LGBT+, which somehow made its way onto the main page of the party website - as opposed to the organisation's own part of that.

It was removed to the relevant section of the site soon after, with its appearance being blamed on an IT glitch which allowed affiliated organisations to post directly on the party's site instead of their own section. This glitch appears to have eluded other AOs.

Christine Jardine asked a parliamentary question about staffing issues associated with Cass though without commenting on the report itself, and one would have to search long and hard for comment from health spokesperson Daisy Cooper. Given the toxicity of this debate within the party Cooper may have decided silence was the best option. She will clearly go far.

In the Lords, health spokesperson Richard Allan asked about whether the government would ensure patients at adult gender services would be confident to participate in research.

## INVASION OF THE ZOMBIES

When David Owen wound up the SDP in 1990 following its humiliation at the hands of Screaming Lord Sutch, a tiny band of true believers carried on and are running 113 candidates at the general election.

They will be standing under the slogan 'family, community, nation', which sounds like something deployed by a military junta seeking an acceptable face. The SDP, which calls itself "patriotic, economically left-leaning and culturally traditional" thus faces £56,500 in lost deposits.

On a more modest scale, the pro-Brexit continuing Liberal party has 13 candidates in the field, mainly in Cornwall and Liverpool, and so is looking down the barrel of a mere £6,500 loss.

## GREEN TIE NEXT?

To the surprise of no-one Kishan Devani has joined Labour. He was originally a Tory, then joined the Lib Dems and fought Montgomery at the last general election, where he achieved a 2.2% decline in the vote. Pictures on the internet show Devani has quite a collection of ties - blue when he was a Tory, yellow when Lib Dem and now red for Labour.

His LinkedIn entry described him as a professor and 'Public Figure' (the capital letters are his). The professorship comes from being an honorary professor at Tashkent Medical Academy, Uzbekistan.

# SEVEN WAYS TO EXPLOIT LABOUR'S FRACTURES

The Tories look finished, but Labour is not as united or powerful as it looks and the Liberal Democrats can exploit this if they are bold enough, says Roger Hayes

We are heading toward what could be the most significant general election since the First World War. We may also be about to witness a truly tectonic shift in British politics. Can we be bold enough to grasp the opportunity and mould it to a Liberal and national success over the next few years?

Here are what I consider to be some of the underlying issues that very few commentators have mentioned and I am convinced (and have been for 18 months) that these could be the real pointers to the possibilities for the Liberal Democrats beyond this election.

Spoiler Alert. The Tories are fucked, and I mean really, seriously, 1906-style banjaxed. The result could be somewhere between utter embarrassment and complete, unrecoverable annihilation. What is a lot less certain is where the millions of votes the Tories will lose will go to. We will see in a few short weeks if this little yarn of mine holds any water.

There is a reason that Natalie Elphicke is at home in the Labour Party in a way that the likes of Jeremy Corbyn and Diane Abbott never will be again. There is a reason that Kier Starmer is happy to embrace the right-winger and her ilk, and gamble on haemorrhaging his party's life-long faithful for those heading towards Reform UK. That reason is, Labour is transitioning to become a centre-right, increasingly economically and socially conservative party.

Starmer wants to pretend he still cares for people and planet but he has jettisoned all principles, pledges and policies that might in anyway be off-putting to its once habitual, but now unashamedly conservative-inclined red-wall voters.

Labour has its fingers tightly crossed as it hopes it can take its traditional left-leaning, well educated, Guardian-reading, middle class members and voters for granted. It hopes they won't mind, that in the frantic, head-long pursuit of power there must be compromise in order to get the stay-at-home, recently-Tory, but increasingly Reform-minded, red-wall Brexiteers to vote Labour.

## TUNES ON THE DOG WHISTLE

They're going to need some fancy tunes played on the dog-whistle. The sort of tunes Starmer, Rachel Reeves and Pat McFadden, are keen to learn. The sort of tunes they know maestros like Elphicke and the Brexiteer Band play only too well.

On 3 May the headlines may have proclaimed a 'seismic victory' for Labour at the Blackpool South by-election, but like its performance at previous by-elections, at the country-wide local elections on the same day, and at the locals last year,

Labour has only been winning when 2019 Tory voters stay at home. With a meagre 32% turnout, Labour failed to get as many votes in Blackpool as it did five years earlier when the Tories won the seat. There has been no sign of Starmer convincing anyone other than the long-term party faithful to turn out for it. So it only wins when the Tory vote drops and, by chance, Labour finds itself as the new high-water mark. But I am far from convinced that tactic will work for Labour on 4 July.

There can be no doubt in the minds of any political activist, of any party, who has knocked on any doors in the past few weeks that there is a visceral and vocal loathing for the Tories. I genuinely cannot remember anything like it in my 50 years of canvassing.

Yet, by almost equal measure, there is no real love for Labour either. In 1997 the country had had enough of Thatcher and Major's Conservatives, but Blair and New Labour had also grabbed the nation's imagination and he was winning voters over as much as the Tories were losing them.

There is no evidence that is happening today. In fact, by contrast, even in its safe heartlands, the Labour party faithful are peeling away over its Tory-copycat, rightward drift; its stance on Gaza; its desertion of green policy commitments; the list goes on. And, just as queues are forming at polling stations to oust this wretched government, the Labour Party finds itself wondering what those who haven't bothered to vote for anyone recently, will do come 4 July.

Well, here is a plausible thought. As Labour pursues its 'power-at-any-price' policy, there are at least four ways its vote is fracturing and, just as the Tories' bitter internal battles are helping their demise, Labour has similar problems from within. It is struggling to hold what it has, let alone win new voters to its cause.

John Cruddas's more-in-sorrow-than-anger farewell as an MP summed things up well. As he puts it, Labour has never had a plan to put things right since Thatcher, merely to patch things up and make them a bit better. And so Britain's slide into decline has continued, and gathered pace, under this great disaster of serial Tory incompetence, gorging itself on abhorrent, right-wing ideology. And yet, rather than crying "enough" from the roof tops, Starmer and Reeves have no plan to reverse the decline, instead meekly folding the country's woes into their spending plans and removing any scope for meaningful change.

To make serious inroads on the national scene, the Liberal Democrats must be exploiting Labour's fractures, and not just in the hopes of some useful tactical votes.

Labour's fractures will increase once it is in power. There are many good liberals and greens in the Labour party and these should be our first target. They find themselves there by chance, geography, or inertia. We must now encourage them away. Similarly, those with an environmental and green leaning should be persuaded that the Lib Dems are a better bet for their priorities. But we have to show our social justice and environmental credentials. We must not be distracted by the British equivalent of the US gun lobby and hide in case some Daily Mail reading suburbanites think we are coming after their cars.

Of course we want disaffected Conservative voters to switch to us, but we are doing that where I live, and across southern England, by showing people the benefits of Liberalism, not by being pale-blue Tories.

### **RED WALL PROBLEM**

Labour's biggest problem remains the so-called red-wall: socially conservative, Brexit-backing seats in the midlands and the north. Here the Labour scales fell from right-inclined eyes when Johnson, Gove and Cummings lied their way to a referendum success in 2016, and then Johnson duped them for a second time in December 2019.

This second fault line is the prime cause for Labour's caution and its predictable rightwards drift. The Conservative's 2019 red-wall vote now has four basic options: stay at home/abstain; vote Reform UK; go back to Labour; reluctantly return to the Tories to keep Labour out. So far, in by-elections and local elections, this vote has overwhelmingly chosen the first option. At a general election, however, when the government of the nation is at stake and turnout is almost always higher, how those 12-15,000 stay-at-homers in every constituency chose to vote may very well hold Labour's fate in the balance.

Like any religious or ethnic group, it is of course wrong to assume Muslims think and act as one. However, over the past six months, and at the local elections just a few weeks ago, large numbers of once Labour-backing Muslims in the large ethnic communities around Birmingham, Greater Manchester and West Yorkshire began to switch their allegiance away from Labour.

This third fracture has seen swaths of Labour councillors resign their party memberships to sit as Independents, so much so that Labour lost control of Oldham and Kirklees councils and shed seats and reduced its majorities in many more northern cities. With George Galloway agitating and standing candidates, there is a strong chance that these Labour heartlands come under siege. It is unlikely that any will be affected so badly as to unseat any sitting Labour MPs, but Galloway may well retain Rochdale and in other seats Labour may feel sufficiently under threat to stay and fight when they would otherwise have decamped to help win marginals.

That leaves the now smaller faction of power-at-any-price Blairites, or should that now be Starmerites? Those who believe Labour can only win by becoming something else. As, most recently Corbyn demonstrated, if Labour shows its true colours

*“As Labour pursues its ‘power-at-any-price’ policy, there are at least four ways its vote is fracturing and, just as the Tories’ bitter internal battles are helping their demise, Labour has similar problems from within”*

people run a mile and this fourth group are keen to point out, “Starmer has transformed the Labour Party”. My point entirely.

Cruddas says, “I perpetually believed we would win, but we always lost.” And so, once again, in the middle of a general election campaign, Labour is centre stage desperate to show that it is anything but Labour. A cosy little, don't frighten granny, Daily Mail approved, centre-right party that won't put up taxes for the rich, doesn't really like foreigners, will overlook big business corruption and incompetent in the delivery of essential public services, and won't even mention the housing crisis in its pledges let alone fix the problem.

### **CLEVER PLOY**

I know there are those who think that Starmer's bland persona and Tory-lite agenda is all part of some clever ploy, but I am equally sure from the hundreds of doors I have knocked on that there is a real sense in the country, even as pissed off with all politics as so many people are, that we haven't waited this long, haven't gone through all the pain and betrayal, just to end up with the vaguely acceptable face of Conservatism draped in a badly faded red flag.

Now, don't get me wrong, I am certain the Tories will lose and lose badly. I am certain that Labour will win, however, as of today, I do not believe there will be a Labour landslide. And just as the Tories quickly tore themselves apart after Johnson's victory in 2019, so I predict Labour's rifts will be rapidly exposed and fester once Starmer is in No. 10.

There is a very real opportunity here for the Lib Dems, but playing it low-key, by pointing out the failings of others and saying little more than we support carers, don't like sewerage and are really quite nice, isn't going to cut it beyond a few dozen extra seats. Our ambition for our party and our country must be much greater than that and many more seats can be within our grasp if we take up the slack Labour is leaving, as well as fill the yawning chasm the Tories have created.

We mustn't not go chasing after the right-wing drift. These are people who will never vote for us and frankly we don't want them. There is, however, a growing gap left by Labour's desertion of fairness, social justice, environmental protection and social liberalism. This we must gladly fill. As Labour rushes to claim the centre-right, all but vacated by the Conservatives, let us proudly proclaim ourselves as the centre-left party at the mainstream of British politics. We should put the Tories out of their (and everyone's) misery and seek to become the official

opposition to Labour within five years.

I have long been a strong believer that Thatcher was right about one thing – mark out the 40% of the electorate you want to vote for you. For the Lib Dems, appeal directly to their fair-minded, socially liberal, progressive and reformist views. This also helps us win activists. Those not just inclined to vote Lib Dem, but who will get off their arses and actually do something to make success more likely.

Tory loathing has given us very many potential voters, especially (but not exclusively) in the south and west. But to win all of them over and get them to vote for us in record numbers we must give them positive reasons. We can't just be Not-the-Tory-party and hope for the best.

---

Roger Hayes is a Lib Dem councillor in Kingston-upon-Thames and a former parliamentary candidate.

## The Lib Dem 7-to-sort pledge

So, to kick off the discussion, here's my starter for seven. Seven themes to mark out our distinctive Liberal ground. Seven things we stand for and should openly campaigning on. Seven things to give those already supporting us reason to enthusiastically keep doing so. Seven things that will make it easier for Labour and Green voters to back us tactically now and encourage them eventually to join us. And, yes, seven issues that can also appeal to ex-Tory voters repulsed by what they have seen their government become and are now hungry for decency and honesty to return to politics.

1. Properly fund and reform public services, including local government. Take essential services – water, energy and rail, into mutual and accountable ownership.

2. Start a climate action revolution. Construct a national Smart Grid for renewable energy – locally sourced and managed, keeping local money local, and ensuring cheap, safe and secure power for all.

3. Create the golden thread that links planning, with land supply, to housing need, with tenure flexibility, and fair transferable financing.

4. Reform education from pre-school to university and onto lifelong learning, teach critical thinking and ensure a triumph of teaching over testing.

5. Realise an NHS and linked care service that works for everyone, properly valuing the service, its providers, and the genuine good physical health and mental wellbeing offers society.

6. Balance and enshrine environmental protection and biodiversity with eco-living encouraging every citizens to reclaim and reform recreation in their environment.

7. ... and justice for all. Constitutional reform, real power and responsibility in a Citizens Britain, building a Liberal Society and the prosperity from peace that it can bring. And, yes, much closer ties again with Europe, starting with rejoining the Single Market.

This is obviously not a definitive list and not in any priority order. But I do hope we can start a debate and encourage the party, its members and supporters, its elected and appointed representatives at all levels from now and beyond the election, to stand for meaningful Liberalism and aim in all we do to be so much more than 'not the Tory Party'.





# 'USELESS' LEAVES

## The SNP's recent fiascos have opened opportunities for other parties in Scotland, says Nigel Lindsey

A small irony of the forthcoming general election is that Ed Davey's ambition for Lib Dems to be the third party at Westminster may depend less on the number of seats he wins than on the extent to which the SNP implodes.

Current polling suggests that the SNP will lose a significant number of seats, but that the result will not be a complete disaster for them.

The reasons for their decline are well-known. The high-profile police investigation into SNP finances, and whether money given for campaigning on independence was used for more general purposes, has certainly been a factor. So has their obvious incompetence in some areas of government, notably their wretched failure in procurement of ferries for the island areas. Their obsession with centralised control has also caused widespread discontent.

Some of these difficulties might have been overcome if the nationalists had not been encumbered by the baleful figure of Humza Yousaf as their leader for the past year.

Yousaf became First Minister with a record of failure in his earlier posts, where he had acquired the soubriquet 'useless'. From the moment of his appointment as FM, his weaknesses became apparent. From his speech accepting the job, it was clear that he wanted to be First Minister rather than to do anything radical or new. In what looked like a fit of pique he then excluded Kate Forbes, who had run him close in the leadership race, from his cabinet. That lost him one of the party's few thinkers.

### UNDISTINGUISHED YEAR

Yousaf's year in office was undistinguished and few were sad to see him go. He provided no leadership and seemed to have no sense of direction. Vapid talk about being 'the continuity candidate' did him more harm than good as Nicola Sturgeon's reputation crumbled. His tendency to make rash decisions without consultation came into focus when he announced yet another extension of the council tax freeze, widely seen as benefitting well-off voters and further eroding local authorities' ability to provide adequate services.

It was this tendency that ultimately brought his downfall when, again apparently in pique, he sacked the Green Party cabinet members. This had been widely foreseen and was probably inevitable, but the rough way it was done caused unnecessary annoyance. The Greens retaliated by removing his parliamentary majority and thereby his job. The SNP then began to look uncannily like the Tories in Westminster: an aura of incompetence, including having three leaders in as many years.

Unlike the Tories, the SNP moved swiftly to restore calm. Would-be leaders were persuaded not to contest the post, which went by unanimous consent to John Swinney, a former leader. Swinney is a decent man, honest and competent, and he commands respect outside his own party as well as within. He has made clear his desire to work with other parties. He moved

quickly to restore Forbes to the cabinet and, since he is unlikely to stand again, this makes her likely to be his successor. Forbes is young, energetic, and intelligent, and previously held the finance brief. She is often berated for her socially conservative views on matters such as gender identity and gay marriage, but it would be a mistake to underestimate the extent to which her opinions come as a secret relief to many Scots, who felt browbeaten by the Greens into supporting social changes on which they had not been consulted and about which they felt uneasy.

The SNP will certainly lose seats in the general election but they should not be written off. Support for independence remains high and is well above SNP support.

If an incoming Labour government starts foisting London-oriented policies on Scotland, as has happened before, voters are likely to return to the SNP. In the meantime, there is a curious political vacuum. Almost half of Scottish voters say they support independence, though the priority varies. Yet only about a third intend to vote SNP. Around 15% of the total vote is therefore available in theory to any party other than the SNP that can somehow channel this sympathy towards independence. It is time for the Lib Dems to become more vocal in explaining how federalism would work, and the benefits it would bring to Scotland.

In the short term, softening of the SNP vote will help the LibDems by making retention of existing seats more probable, and helping to win at least two more. Current polling shows Labour as the main beneficiary of the SNP's decline. Their support has risen, and has now drawn roughly level with the SNP. Because 2021 was their worst result ever in Scotland, a Labour comeback is hardly surprising. The Conservatives remain steady at 15% (where do these people come from?) and Lib Dem fortunes have improved. This improvement is crucial. If maintained, it could mean the difference between winning no Scottish Parliament list seats (as at present) and winning five or six. Alex Cole-Hamilton may find himself ready to form a Lib-Lab coalition to provide Scotland with a radical and competent programme of government.

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Nigel Lindsay was a Liberal member of Aberdeen City Council for many years. He co-ordinates Liberal Futures, a group interested in radical Liberal thinking in Scotland.

# PUB TALK AFTER 2 MAY

## Crystal ball gazing may belong in the pub but the 2 May results give some clear pointers for what may be about to happen to each party, says Chris White

On the two days after 2 May elections, there was considerable media attention to the results, both in terms of councils won and in terms of seats won. This was an exhilarating moment for Liberal Democrats because it became plain, quite a while before the announcements stopped coming in, that the Liberal Democrats had come second. Liberal Democrats, at least in these elections, were the second party of local government.

This was hardly the BBC's finest hour. There was apparent reluctance to acknowledge that fact and in some places significant carelessness in how results were announced.

For instance, in Hertfordshire the BBC published the results of the police and crime commissioner (PCC) election for one district, where the Liberal Democrats were fourth, as if it were the whole county, a result which was freely available and which confirmed that the Liberal Democrats had come second. It was eventually corrected but it is astonishing that the mistake was made.

It is easy on these occasions to suggest that there is bias. The reality is more likely, for the most part, incompetence. But that should not conceal the fact that we are not only not loved but often not noticed by the country's media.

### **BINARY NARRATIVE**

Some of the reasons for that depend on the situation in parliament where we have not for some years been the third party. And some is the binary narrative which is so easy for broadcasters lazily to latch onto.

So what do we do? On the one hand we can be thankful that the analysis did not go deeper. While we had a very good set of local election results for the most part, the Green Party also did well in comparative terms.

On the other hand, taking to social media to condemn organisations or named broadcasters is not actually going to remedy the situation except in detail. Although I did that for the Hertfordshire result.

As ever, with a campaigner hat on, the answer is to campaign harder and better and win noticeably. And that gives us a clue about what we have to do over the next few weeks.

This should also remind us that while we may rail to each other about the iniquity of the changed electoral system for PCCs, complaining is going to change little. The fiddled election system did make a difference: almost certainly in Hertfordshire and probably Surrey, where we would have won the police and crime commissioner election had the alternative vote system still been in place.

We can only hope that an incoming Labour government will reverse some of the election rigging undertaken by the Conservatives following their careful reading of the Trump handbook.

That said, it is increasingly difficult to be optimistic about an incoming Labour government: there seems to be no evidence that there is alongside Keir Starmer a Roy Jenkins figure who

will introduce radical liberal change rather than a marginally better form of Conservatism.

Unless you're the BBC, it is impossible to avoid the fact that the Liberal Democrats did extremely well. We won 522 seats, roughly half of what Labour won, a smidgen ahead of the Conservatives (seven in fact): but ahead. We gained 104 seats, which is more than half of what Labour gained but, as I indicated before, the Green Party gained a creditable 74.

The Green Party continues therefore to be a problem, partly because it has different aspects in different parts of the country. In St Albans they continued their claim that there were too many Liberal Democrats and that they would hold the Liberal Democrats to account, while being in policy terms little different, especially in targeted literature. They deliver a reassuring message for generous-minded Liberal Democrat voters which makes us particularly vulnerable where there is more than one seat up. Nevertheless they made no gains this year in my patch (St Albans): good candidates and huge amounts of targeted work played a part.

We have yet to devise a consistently winning formula against the Green Party to match the winning formula that the Green Party has devised against us. They are a threat in local elections and they live within our vote, in contrast to Labour and the Conservative parties, and therefore are difficult to spot: there are times on polling day when it seems that the more you knock up the Liberal Democrat vote the more you knock up the Green Party vote.

It is, however, unlikely that they will have much of an impact in the general election outside a couple of places in the south of England. Certainly, in terms of Liberal Democrat voters who have defected to the Green Party, it is clear that their changed affections are for local elections only and not for general elections in which Green Party candidates are hardly likely to be seen as credible challengers in much of the country: the big party squeeze affects them even more than it affects us.

The Labour Party reaction to the local elections was interesting: "Labour is planning to target the south of England heavily at the general election as the local election results show some 'blue wall' seats are turning red", Keir Starmer's election chief has said.

The shadow cabinet minister Pat McFadden said in the Guardian on 5 May that Labour was advancing in southern Tory heartlands and it was wrong to think the Lib Dems were the only challengers to the Conservatives in the south. The message is defensive and breaks the normal rule not to mention positively other political parties in analysing results or campaigning. This looks like a Labour Party which is afraid of what it has seen: winning barely twice as many as the Liberal Democrats in the recent elections will from their point of view have been rather disappointing.

It is common for comparisons to be made between now and 1997. As has again been noted by The Guardian (18 March),

there is less public confidence now in all politicians and less optimism that Labour is ready to form the next government.

Labour's leaders are less popular than they were in 1997, both generally and in terms of leading shadow ministers. This explains, in part at least, why the party's manifesto continues to be diluted for fear of coming under attack between now and general election polling day.

And of course the SNP has not necessarily gone away. Labour has a mountain still to climb in Scotland. But Labour is also surprisingly weak in parts of the south of England.

I recall when St Albans had 15 Labour councillors – now there are only two (and recently there were none. In Watford Labour went backwards and Labour everywhere is challenged by the stance on Gaza. While Labour is of course not universally weak, before 1997 in large parts of England it did appear to be universally strong. It seems hard to remember, but Tony Blair appeared to be a young, glamorous alternative to a tired government. Starmer is not glamorous even if he may be (usually) competent.

This general weakness is behind the astonishing decision to accept Natalie Elphicke's defection, hoping that people in blue wall seats really are riled up about small boats. There is some reason for this: immigration is easily the top issue for those who voted Conservative in 2019. But it may yet prove to be a bad mistake in relation not only to his own members but also the public at large: a recent Opinium poll indicated that 33% of voters thought it was wrong to accept her while only 16% thought it was right. As Neil Kinnock discovered long ago the appearance of competence can evaporate in a single moment.

That means we are not necessarily moving into a territory in which a Labour landslide is a given. Nor even into territory in which a Labour majority is a given, although Sunak's early efforts in the general election have been hugely helpful to opposition parties.

There may yet be a hung parliament. We might suddenly find ourselves again in the position of being expected to prop up a minority government which does not have a popular mandate, as we were in 2010.

## **PAINFUL LESSONS**

There are painful lessons from that: going into coalition at all, we now know definitively, is a mug's game and surrendering your key principles (electoral reform and tuition fees) for the sight of a red box can more or less destroy the party at the following elections. One can only hope that those lessons have been fully absorbed by those who might find themselves negotiating some kind of arrangement in the House of Commons. Crystal ball gazing twelve months ahead is really pub talk but irresistible.

The 4 July general election was a surprise but opposition parties have worked up all sorts of contingency plans for surprises. Perhaps when we heard Sunak say that the general

*“We have yet to devise a consistently winning formula against the Green Party to match the winning formula that the Green Party has devised against us”*

election would be in the second half of the year we should not have read that as code for ‘September onwards’? History may tell us why he chose that date. Backbench Tory MPs certainly won't: they were astonished, even aghast. There has been speculation about 1922 Committee letters (even a mad scheme to send in so many that the dissolution could somehow be reversed). Other wags have made

comments about school terms in California.

The likelihood is that Sunak has overreacted to a small piece of economic news in the full expectation that it is only going to get worse from now on. This is a man who has a track record of overreacting: witness his response to the Hillingdon by-election and again to the Rochdale by-election.

It doesn't matter. He is yesterday's man. A soon to be defeated Tory party will be tempted to pivot right or left. The direction it pursues will depend on a new leader elected by a system (or at least a membership list) already demonstrated to be deeply flawed. Reform's local election performance was pitiful in terms of seats but impressive (“Outstanding” said its leader Richard Tice) in terms of votes. Up to a third of Tory votes overall seem to be making their way to Reform candidates. It didn't deliver in the locals but it may well provide additional Labour and Liberal Democrat parliamentary gains.

Wise Tories point out that the key learning point on 2 May was the fact that Andy Street nearly held the West Midlands mayoralty. Moderate and competent candidates can do well. The Tory candidate in London did not. Sadly for them there are not that many wise Tories left.

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

# A BIT OF GAZA – A LOT OF OLDHAM

## Labour's loss of control in Oldham arose not only about anger over Gaza, but from its own failures over 13 years, says Howard Sykes

One of the great things about Liberals is we understand that complicated issues rarely have simple explanations.

So, when the pundits and political commentators look at election results like those that have unfolded in Oldham this year only through the prism of the Israel/Gaza conflict, as Liberals, we must not accept lazy assumptions.

The truth is, there is more than one reason why Labour has lost control of the council in Oldham. To reduce the politics of our communities down solely to a reaction to the horror that has unfolded since 7 October is wrong.

Labour has controlled Oldham for 13 years. But over recent years, they have been steadily losing ground to opposition parties and a rag bag of Independents in local elections.

### STAGGERINGLY ARROGANT

Indeed, Labour has also lost three council Leaders at the ballot box. To lose one leader in this way would be enough of a wake-up call for most. Especially given the instability and uncertainty a defeat like that causes within the senior governance structure of any local authority. But to slump to three such defeats without the slightest change in approach is staggeringly arrogant.

Change is slow, with only a third of the council up for election three years out of four. From a high watermark of 47 seats out of 60 in 2018, Labour went into this year's election having just 31 seats. They then lost a further net four. So, Oldham Labour's loss of control was no bolt from the blue, this has been the direction of travel for years. Labour has its own local record to blame.

Liberal Democrat campaigners who fight Labour in their heartlands will tell you that Labour politicians are 'centralisers' by nature. This is certainly true in Oldham. They have relentlessly focused on costly projects in Oldham town centre, failing to secure investment and regeneration for the districts, towns, and villages that make up the wider Oldham borough.

This has led to resentment and a feeling of neglect in much of the borough, which has been compounded by the sense of decline that people across the country feel, as they have watched basic council services being stripped away year on year, by successive governments in Westminster hellbent on the decimation of local government.

In communities up and down the country the pandemic hit people hard, and the cost-of-living crisis followed. While no one in Oldham is ever looking for a handout, we have many areas of deprivation – some of the highest in the country, and many people are barely getting by. People were frustrated with the Labour council, which moved too slowly and did not bring forward enough support for people, schools and businesses when it was most needed.

People here also feel taken for granted at a regional level. Oldham is part of the Labour dominated Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA), which is chaired by Andy Burnham. Mayor Burnham and the GMCA have spent the last several years pushing a city-wide housing strategy called 'Places for Everyone' which is controversial for its use of greenbelt (lots of which is in Oldham) and failure to provide assurances over affordable housing.

Housing policy is complicated and controversial at the best of times. But as Liberals we know that power should be exercised at the lowest possible level. It is communities themselves who should decide how to plan for their own futures. It has therefore been galling for Oldhamers to see their voices diluted and drowned out on the regional stage. In many ways, Oldham Council's decision-making abilities have been surrendered to the larger combined authority, which is dominated by the more affluent Greater Manchester boroughs and principally, the economic heft of Manchester city centre. Here again, Oldhamers have seen their autonomy lost to Labour's centralising instinct.

Labour has also presided over the loss of one of Oldham's most treasured institutions – the Oldham Coliseum Theatre.

For more than 135 years, the Coliseum dazzled and delighted audiences, distinguishing itself as one of the north's only producing theatres and earning a stellar reputation on the national stage.

But like many smaller regional theatres, the Coliseum has struggled financially in recent years. Under Labour, instead of helping the theatre, Oldham Council has allowed a decade of opportunities to pass by. Consequently, the Coliseum has become increasingly reliant on Arts Council England funding and, in February last year, that funding came to an end.

### LOCAL TRAGEDY

Despite high profile campaigning and the interventions of big names such as Maxine Peake and Christopher Ecclestone, the Coliseum closed its doors for good on 31 March 2023. A local tragedy which was entirely avoidable and within the gift of the council to solve.

Oldham has also made national headlines in recent years following revelations about historic child sexual exploitation.

An Independent Assurance Review - commissioned by Andy Burnham - into the handling of abuse was published by Malcolm Newsam and Gary Ridgway in June 2022. Their findings were harrowing. The review detailed not only the heinous crimes and the suffering of children, but also the most unforgivable multi-agency failings surrounding those crimes. Greater Manchester Police, social services and Oldham Council

were all found to have failed the victims.

Yet it was the current administration's response to these findings which caused the most anger.

Labour declined to call for a full public inquiry. In fact, they have voted against doing so on numerous occasions since the Newsam & Ridgway report was published, even when the authors themselves, along with victims and respected whistle-blowers, publicly criticised the limited scope of the review.

To this day, no direct action has been taken against services and individuals involved in the failings, even when those individuals are still in the council's or police employ. Is it any wonder then, that public trust in Oldham Council and its services is in tatters?

Even now, after losing 20 seats in six years, after watching three council leaders lose their seats and after losing overall control of the council, Oldham Labour still stubbornly stick to their script.

They have appointed the same leader and have failed to show an ounce of contrition when speaking publicly about the election results. Instead, they attack opposition parties in the press with one breath and with the next, they ask for our votes in the council chamber. In so doing, their primary motive is still personal position over policy, or public service. They pay only the merest of lip service to the issues that voters continually tell us they care about.

Their first concern, always, is themselves and their right to rule. Labour in my experience will do anything to maintain their power and influence.

It is the unmistakable arrogance of an establishment party that have been in power too long. Exactly the kind of entitlement and ignorance that Liberal Democrats exist to fight against. It is a mirror image of this failed Conservative Government.

None of this is to say that what is happening in Gaza has not been a factor in this year's local elections, as the media have widely reported, because it has.

It is well documented that Oldham is a diverse place, with a large Muslim population. Everyone has watched the unfolding conflict with horror and the impact has been even more sharply felt in some of our communities here in Oldham. There is no doubt that in some local contests, the issue of Gaza and particularly the discontent felt by many British Muslims over Keir Starmer's response, will have been a motivating factor when people voted.

But to say that Labour have lost control of Oldham Council solely because of 'the Gaza issue' is wrong because it masks six years of Labour decline, linked directly to their own failure to listen to the people they represent. The politics of Oldham is as varied as the people who make up our borough. No single issue has done for Labour here. It is their record after 13 years in power which has lost them the council.

It speaks volumes that in the weeks after the local elections, Liberal Democrat, Conservative, The Oldham Group (an anti-Labour Muslim grouping) and Independent councillors have been able to come together.

*“Liberal Democrat campaigners who fight Labour in their heartlands will tell you that Labour politicians are ‘centralisers’ by nature”*

Despite being members of different political parties, having differing views locally, nationally and internationally, these councillors put those differences to one side in order to put the entire borough of Oldham first.

We offered a new administration that would have pursued the following on behalf of everyone who lives and works in the borough:

- A public inquiry into historic child sex exploitation within the borough
- Withdraw the borough from Greater Manchester's Place for Everyone
- Support a new health centre for Saddleworth
- Investigate new secondary education provision for central Oldham
- A freeze in the general council tax precept if possible
- Provide equal access to burial services consistent with the needs of all the faiths of the borough
- Save the Coliseum at its existing site
- Provide more money for our districts and villages
- Prosecute and action on environmental crimes
- Provide more clarity and honesty about how and why council decisions are taken
- Set an example of good governance by inviting the largest opposition group to lead the scrutiny process.

At annual council y a motion to remove the current Labour leader, and install myself, just failed 28 to 29 with three abstaining.

Although Labour survived with support from some so-called Independents, the positive conversations between opposition parties will continue. It is vital that those who want to see a better politics in Oldham continue to cooperate.

The end of May is the anniversary of the Oldham riots in 2001. Much of the very necessary good work that was done after that event has been forgotten or is no longer undertaken. As trust in politics declines, communities begin to retreat. In these conditions, old barriers that were so painstakingly dismantled, start to reappear.

To see Oldham unlearn the lessons of its history in this way can leave you feeling despondent. But this May, leading opposition politicians spent time talking, understanding; and working out how we might work together. There is hope to be taken from that.

There are no easy solutions to complicated issues. To roll back the damage that has been done and to sow the seeds of a fairer future will take compromise and hard work. In short, exactly the kind of grown-up, plural politics that Liberals believe in.

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Howard Sykes is leader the Liberal Democrat group on Oldham Council

# VANISHING ACT

## Banks are disappearing from entire towns, but those who depend on them need the next Government to ensure ‘banking hubs’ have regulated services, says Claire Tyler

The whole banking landscape has changed beyond recognition in the last five years. The rapid transition to digital banking, and a broadly cashless way of life suits a lot of people. I do a lot – but by no means all - of my personal banking online, but sometimes need to speak to someone on more complex transactions and that’s getting increasingly difficult as I found out when my mother passed away recently.

The blunt truth is an increasing number of people and communities are being left behind by this digital revolution and their basic banking needs are barely being met, if at all. In my view the banking transformation has happened without proper engagement with its customer base and certainly without the consent of many vulnerable groups and communities. It has simply been done to them and they feel powerless.

Between five and eight million people still rely on cash and many on low incomes use it to budget. They often rely on face-to-face contact to manage their basic banking. These people are likely to be digitally excluded and financially vulnerable.

The UK has lost more than half of its branch network – some 6,000 branches - since 2015. There will soon be 33 parliamentary constituencies without any permanent bank branches, while a further 49 constituencies are down to their last branch.

It’s been estimated that banks are saving up to £2.5bn annually – so this new banking models suits them very well. Banks argue that this is because people are changing the way they do their banking, primarily using on line, mobile and telephone banking. But surveys show that many customers feel they are being forced into a new way of banking that they find far less convenient and secure. Customers whose local branch has shut down are having to travel long distances if they want to talk to someone about their money.

According to Which?, 645 branches closed in 2023 alone, with Barclays leading the pack with 180 closures. Already 387 closures are scheduled for this current year with 24 closures planned for 2025. The trend is towards remaining branches being increasingly concentrated in bigger city centres leaving large swathes of the country totally denuded.

Nationwide is the only provider so far to buck the trend with the most branches remaining open across the country. It has also pledged to not leave any town or city in which it is based until at least 2026 proving that a more managed transition is possible. It will be interesting to see how Nationwide fares.

### **BANKING DESERTS**

The research evidence shows that the groups most badly affected are people with disabilities; older people; and people living in rural areas who often face poor broadband and mobile coverage. Some deprived areas are now effectively ‘banking

deserts’ hitting the local economy badly and adding to the bleakness of shuttered up high streets.

Last June 2023 a Which? survey found 52% of disabled bank customers said bank branch closures had a negative impact on their ability to access vital banking services.

It’s a particular problem for many older people as the following data from Age UK shows:

- More than a quarter of over 65s predominantly bank face-to-face in a branch or other physical location, such as a Post Office
- Only 14% of the 85+ age group bank online, with 58% relying on face-to-face banking
- 75% of over 65s wish to carry out at least one transaction in a branch
- According to Age UK polling, the main reasons for older people feeling uncomfortable with on line banking were fear of fraud; a lack of trust in online banking services; and a lack of IT skills.

People living in rural communities where digital infrastructure can be poor, often have to travel miles to reach their nearest alternative source of cash. They are also among the most reliant on bank branches and cash access services. Some banks still insist on customers coming to a physical branch to do tasks such as registering powers of attorney. This can entail long round trips by buses – where they exist – or even by taxi.

It’s not just individuals who are affected. Small businesses are concerned that branch closures have reduced productivity due to time spent away from their businesses having to travel further to access banking services and reduced their ability to manage cash flows.

The National Council of Voluntary Organisations say that local branch closures continue to have a negative impact on charities and voluntary groups. Many cannot access counter services to pay in cash including charities that operate a trading arm that accepts cash such as a café.

There is a clear degree of overlap between digital and financial exclusion. In 2023 The House of Lords Select Committee on Digital Exclusion found that 1.7m households have no mobile or broadband internet at home. Up to a million people have cut back or cancelled internet packages in the past year as cost of living challenges bite. Around 2.4m people are unable to complete a single basic task to get online, such as opening an internet browser.

Far too often the debate is framed solely around access to cash. Vital as that is, I think it fails to recognise that some people want and need face-to-face banking without having to make a long journey. This might be registering a death; probate; powers of attorney; support with fraudulent activity; larger payments and transfers, help on mortgages and loans.

The main alternative now to local bank branches are what's called banking hubs which provide basic counter services run by the Post Office along with private spaces where community bankers from different banks are available on a rotation basis. Other options may include Post Office branches, community bankers who travel to areas with no branches and meet customers in pop up facilities such as libraries, community halls or leisure centres and mobile banking vans.

Potentially I think shared banking hubs have a lot to offer.

They can offer customers easy access to cash, deposit facilities, payment of utility bills and so on and face-to-face banking for customers of major high street banks for more complicated matters. Where they exist, research so far indicates that they are working well and proving popular with local communities.

### **GAPING HOLE**

However, the rollout of shared banking hubs has been far too slow. Banking hub services have now opened in some 40 communities and Cash Access UK expects to open at least a further 70 hubs in 2024. This leaves a gaping hole compared with the huge numbers of branches closing each month.

The Financial Services and Markets Act 2023 has given the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) broad powers on how the banks set up shared services to support access to cash, putting LINK - the cash machine network - on a statutory footing for this purpose. Banks have voluntarily agreed to tell LINK when they are planning branch closures so it can decide whether to recommend extra cash and banking services such as a hub.

But critically this is all happening on a voluntary basis only, and the regulator lacks real teeth including on what services a banking hub needs to offer to be able to use that brand name.

Given the unacceptable gap between the closure of the last branch in town and the opening of the banking hub, we also need an urgent - and enforceable - undertaking that the last branch in any area is not allowed to close until a local banking hub opens and cash access is available.

As I argued during its parliamentary passage, the Act was a missed opportunity. It could have put access to physical banking services on a statutory footing and provided real impetus to speed up the roll out of banking hubs, including support for digital inclusion. Banking hubs could have an important role to play in delivering a national programme of digital inclusion training to equip people of all ages with digital financial skills.

This February marked the third anniversary of the FCA consulting on the 'fair treatment of vulnerable customers' and would have been an obvious opportunity to review it based on the lived experience of consumers who have lost their local branch since 2021.

If the political will had existed it would have been well within the power of the Government and the FCA, working with UK Finance, to get the players round the table and agree a commitment that, where the case for a banking hub has been made out, the last branch would not close until the hub is open. This would be consistent with the FCA's requirements to treat

customers fairly and to provide them with the support they need under the Consumer Duty. But the political will was clearly lacking.

What does the next Government need to do? To nobody's surprise the current Government has always maintained that is not their place to get involved in commercial decisions. This totally misses the point that access to banking is an essential service without which it is impossible to take part in day-to-day life. While banks clearly are commercial entities, they also have

a social purpose and should have a universal service obligation that goes a lot wider than just a basic bank account. Just consider the very different approach taken by the Government to gas and electricity companies (public utilities also in the private sector) and their willingness to intervene to protect vulnerable customers.

We need to put rocket boosters under the roll out of shared banking hubs. I've been calling on the government to set clear expectations for the banking industry to deliver a minimum number of shared

banking hubs within a set timeframe. Various figures have been suggested by different players ranging from the low hundreds to LINK who say some 1,000 hubs are needed by 2028 to establish a truly national network.

I want the next Government to commit to a national network of shared banking hubs on every major high street, overseen by the FCA, providing face-to-face basic banking services and to help rejuvenate the local economy.

We also need a universal service obligation for banking as for the Post Office. The next Government has urgent work to do in defining what a banking hub is and the services it must provide. It can't just be a room with a few leaflets and a flipchart at the back of a community hall which a bank employee pops into for two hours a week.

I think this issue is going to come up on the doorstep during this election. Let's hope the next Government finally steps up to the plate.

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Claire Tyler is a Liberal Democrat member of the House of Lords and a member of the Financial Inclusion Commission. She chaired the House of Lords Select Committee on Financial Exclusion in 2017

*“An increasing number of people and communities are being left behind by this digital revolution and their basic banking needs are barely being met”*

# WHICH MUSLIM LIVES MATTER?

## The West's double standards over Sudan are matched by the hypocrisy of Arab, Muslim and African leaders, says Rebecca Tinsley

Where is the world's biggest displacement crisis, and the greatest number of children dying from starvation or injuries? The answer is Sudan. America's envoy believes as many as 150,000 have been killed in the past year. Yet, if you were a Sudanese Muslim, you might conclude that your life is less worthy of media attention or political engagement than your Palestinian co-religionist. (Not that it helps Palestinians to be the subject of 24-hour-a-day news or shuttle diplomacy).

If the media notices Sudan, it portrays the crisis as a humanitarian catastrophe, like an earthquake. The racist political ideology driving the fighting is "too complicated". Since independence in 1956, the mainly Arab groups along the Nile have marginalised the mostly non-Arab people in the less fertile periphery. For decades, the ruling elite has tried to destroy the ethnic groups who ask for a share of the country's bounty.

If Sudan was farmed efficiently, it could feed all of Africa. But each regime has trousered the wealth, leaving it underdeveloped and poor. The elite use performative Islamic fundamentalism to motivate its Arab population to kill the non-Arabs in the peripheries. Hence the slaughter of two million non-Arab non-Muslim Sudanese in what is now South Sudan, and more than 300,000 non-Arab Muslims in Darfur.

### POPULAR REVOLUTION

In 2019, a popular revolution purged the Islamists, installing a transitional government of technocrats. However, they were soon overthrown by the previous junta's Islamists (the generals who are now fighting each other). They feared losing their lucrative hold on the economy and being held accountable for war crimes in Darfur (2003-6).

Throughout the Islamist regime (1989-2019), the revolution (2019) and then the coup (2021), international mediators could have devoted sustained attention to Sudan's challenges to stop the cycle of devastation. They could have used soft power to ensure that competing military interests realised that stepping away from politics was their best option for survival. Instead, the US and the UK (the lead negotiators) never confronted the men with guns. They never insisted that the only future for Sudan lay in the hands of a democratic civilian government accountable to the people. Despite their leverage, they wasted time on the process aspects of negotiations, rather than the substance.

The latest carnage began in April 2023 as the regime's former allies, General Burhan of the Sudanese Armed Forces, and General Hemedti of the Rapid Support Forces faced off, each seeking total power. Hemedti is the richest man in Sudan, controlling gold mines and livestock exports to the Gulf. He is helped by Russia's Wagner Group and the United Arab Emirates. The Sudanese Armed Forces are backed by Egypt, Iran and Russia, dealing with both sides. But this is no proxy war: two wealthy local rivals from the previous regime are destroying their own country, day by day.

There are flaccid efforts to broker a ceasefire, but regional mediators fear democratic civilian rule when the war is over. It would not be welcome by the neighbouring autocratic monarchs and strongman generals. Either general will reinstate the old Islamist regime if they win.

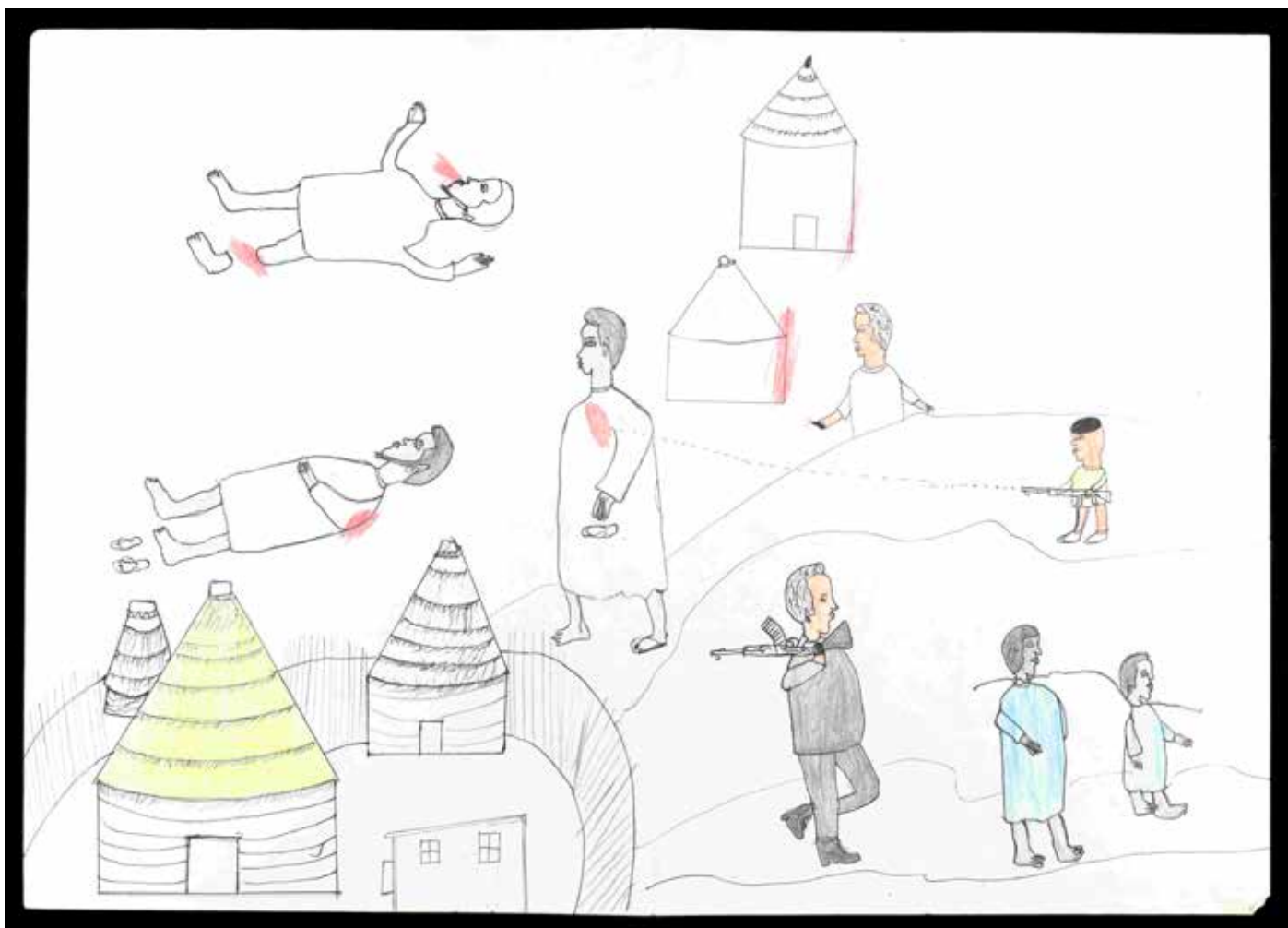
Both sides refuse to allow in adequate aid, and since farmers cannot get to their fields, and markets are destroyed, millions face starvation. Yet, civilians run resistance groups in people's homes, pooling food resources, and emergency rooms providing help to the injured.

Shamefully, international donors and NGOs will not support these ad hoc groups, even though sending them money would be the most efficient way to deliver help.

This is not a civil war: civilians have refused to join the Rapid Support Forces or the Sudanese Armed Forces. The vast majority want a plural, accountable, democratic, tolerant Sudan, and not a return to the kleptocratic military thugs who ran Sudan for decades.

*“There was panic in the ranks when Waging Peace provided the FCDO with old quotes from Boris Johnson, Sajid Javid and other Tory ministers describing Darfur as a genocide”*





In April, France hosted a conference to raise humanitarian aid because the UN's appeal was only 4% funded. However, there is no mechanism for getting pledges honoured. It is standard practice for leaders to make dramatic gestures that never actually materialise.

The EU pays Egypt, Libya and Tunisia billions of Euros to prevent migrants reaching the Mediterranean, so Europe should worry about nine million displaced Sudanese for whom nothing remains of their lives. Thousands are on their way to the UK.

Waging Peace, the NGO I started 20 years ago, supports Sudanese who reach Britain, and we are already overwhelmed by new arrivals (please see link at end to donate to our work).

Russia is central to General Hemedti's gold empire: \$2bn worth a year helps Putin counter sanctions and currency headaches. Hemedti and his rival, Burhan, have both promised Moscow a Red Sea naval base at Port Sudan. From there, Russia could menace international shipping. It could also aid China if Beijing blockaded Taiwan, and the West counter-blockading China.

Iran has had close relations with the Sudanese elite for decades. Tehran will extract a price for supplying General Burhan and the army with weapons throughout this conflict. Iran is also keen on establishing a Red Sea port from which it could disrupt trade.

While the US has applied sanctions on the belligerents, and appointed a first-rate envoy (Tom Perriello), the UK hesitates to use soft power leverage. Until he became foreign secretary, David Cameron had economic links to the United Arab Emirates who are supplying General Hemedti with weapons (they deny this). Moreover, the UAE owns more of London than the Duke of Westminster. We have truly sold England by the

pound to the Gulf Arab elite, and there is reluctance to jeopardise the UK's servile role as the UAE's money butler, arms salesman, and haram playground.

The Foreign Office recently reversed its position on the Darfur genocide of 2003-06 in which more than 300,000 Black Africans were systematically killed. The FCDO now denies it was genocide because only a 'competent court' can make such a determination. There was panic in the ranks when Waging Peace provided the FCDO with old quotes from Boris Johnson, Sajid Javid and other Tory ministers describing Darfur as a genocide.

The FCDO now has another chance to dodge how it categorises crimes against humanity. At the time of writing, the Sudanese Armed Forces are besieged by Hemedti's RSF in the northern Darfur capital of El Fasher. The 1.5m inhabitants (many of the Black Africa) know they will be killed if they try to eescape.

## ETHNIC CLEANSING

Since April 2023, Hemedti's men, plus Arab mercenaries, have been ethnically cleansing Darfur's Black Africans, continuing the campaign of elimination they began twenty years ago. In January 2024, Waging Peace's partner, the Darfur Diaspora Association, called their contacts in Darfur's towns and villages, compiling casualty numbers. They believe at least 28,500 Black African civilians were killed in one city (El Geneina) alone in 2023. This received no traction, despite our efforts to interest the media. It has now been verified by Human Rights Watch in this report. [<https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/05/09/massalit-will-not-come-home/ethnic-cleansing-and-crimes-against-humanity-el>]

The systematic rape of girls and women began on the second day of the war, and the RSF continue to rampage around hospitals, assaulting women. We are told women smear themselves with their own faeces to deter rapists. There are mass graves, and Black bodies are used as speed bumps, but none of this merits attention. The end result could be that the RSF controls Darfur, at liberty to kill the remaining Africans, while the army takes the rest of Sudan: and the international community will do nothing to stop this.

There are no students protesting about the ethnic cleansing of Black Africans in Darfur. In April, a national demonstration marking the first anniversary of the war drew 50 people to Washington. To be fair, nor is there widespread campus outrage about Narendra Modi's treatment of millions of Muslims in India, or President Xi's concentration camps for a million Muslim Uighurs, or the Myanmar regime's ethnic cleansing of Muslim Rohingyas, or the slaughter of thousands of Nigerian Muslims at the hands of Islamic State's local tribute militia. Why don't these Muslim lives matter?

It is not just the West that averts its eyes from these atrocities: Arab and Muslim leaders consistently fail to condemn the barbaric treatment of their coreligionists in Africa, India, China and Myanmar. At the UN Human Rights Council, Arab and Muslim nations abstain or vote not to criticise Beijing for its persecution of the Uighurs. Business deals with China take priority, as do cosy relations with India. The unspoken rule is "We don't criticise you, so don't turn your spotlight on us." Many Arab leaders are currently quaking with fear at the prospect of their citizen's anger at the treatment of the Palestinians morphing into calls for change nearer home.

Africa's despots have a long history of ignoring crimes against humanity in their own neighbourhood. In 1994, Nelson Mandela was the only leader to condemn the Rwandan genocide. The African Union's priority is ensuring that leaders have Trump-like immunity from prosecution. The AU does nothing about the slaughter in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Sudan, or the state capture of national resources in dozens of other countries on the continent. Therefore, Cameroon's brutal 90-year-old thief-in-chief, Paul Biya, is lauded by his fellow leaders because he has studiously refrained from calling attention to their repressive and corrupt practices. South Africa can grandstand about Gaza, confident that no one will point out its xenophobic treatment of Zimbabwean migrants.

Africans have grown accustomed to the selective outrage of their own leaders, as well as the fickleness of sporadically concerned Westerners. Apartheid was condemned by many across the English-speaking world, but decades of persecution and human rights abuses wrought by Amin, Mugabe, Gaddafi, Bokassa, Mobuto, or the crime families in charge of Equatorial Guinea and Angola drew no consumer boycotts or mass demonstrations.

Hungry Sudanese civilians trying to avoid being bombed, raped or drowning as they cross the Channel will conclude that there is something especially repellent about the conflict in Gaza that makes its wretched citizens worthy of the world's attention. More likely, as an old man told me in Darfur twenty years ago, "We are the wrong kind of Muslim: the Black kind."

What should be done?

- Extend the current UN arms embargo on Darfur to cover all of Sudan.
- Send a UN force to Darfur with a Chapter 7 mandate to protect civilians
- Sanction military and militia leaders and their enablers, including Western advisors and financiers, and complicit individuals in the UAE, Russia, Iran and Egypt.

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Rebecca Tinsley is the founder of the charity [www.WagingPeace.info](http://www.WagingPeace.info). To donate see: <https://wagingpeace.info/donate/>

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# POST HASTE

## The Post Office issue may embarrass Lib Dems, but the party must think about new ownership models and roles for the service, says David Warren

When I joined the Post Office in the summer of 1985 it was all about public service. We were all one corporation, deliveries, collections, sorters, parcels and counters. Everything was geared towards processing and delivering six days a week by 0930 am. Basic pay wasn't particularly high but overtime opportunities were plentiful. There was also job security and a final salary pension scheme.

There certainly weren't any Czech billionaires. In fact every office had a sign saying that if we planned to visit any Eastern Bloc countries we had to advise the relevant department. We had signed the Official Secrets Act after all.

The Tories hadn't really got around to meddling with the organisation but they were just gearing up. In 1987 the business - as they had started to call it - was split into Royal Mail, Parcels, Counters and some smaller sections. This had the effect of weakening the strong Union of Communication Workers (UCW) particularly outside Royal Mail where organisation was much stronger. In fact in the large sorting offices it was able to pretty well run things through joint committees with management and the oversight of things like overtime allocation. The following year a confrontation was engineered with the union over the imposition of regional pay supplements but a 10-day strike ended in a draw with a compromise deal.

It was 1992 that saw a major change with a massive internal reorganisation clearly aimed at privatisation which gave every manager - even those with very small units - a budget. Union influence was reduced through a new industrial relations agreement which arrived on the back of threats to withdraw all facilities to the UCW including time off to represent members and accommodation in the workplace.

Two years later the Tories showed their hand when Michael Heseltine announced proposals for privatisation. The union responded with a vigorous campaign led by General Secretary Alan Johnson which persuaded enough MPs to rebel. Johnson would go on to be a Labour cabinet minister and enthusiastic advocate of privatisation.

The New Labour years brought more commercialisation and a national strike in 2007 which the union lost largely due to its reluctance to continue fighting a party that is funded, preferring instead to agree to inferior terms and conditions for its members.

Peter Mandelson became the minister responsible which quickly led to another privatisation plan enthusiastically supported by the Tory opposition. It ended up being dropped as a result of backbench opposition combined with an imminent general election. However the coalition elected in 2010 quickly revived the plan which was piloted through parliament by Vince Cable then business secretary. Things have not gone well since. Services have suffered with many areas complaining about late deliveries or no delivery. Working conditions have worsened leading to high staff turnover and the lack of commercial nous

has meant a failure to really exploit the opportunities presented by an expanding parcels market. Letter volumes have fallen dramatically, as would have happened regardless of who owned Royal Mail given the rise in electronic means of communication. That inevitably leads to a debate about the future of the Universal Service Obligation, which is currently six days a week. That said I am convinced this is being widely ignored through lapsing of routes which an ineffective regulator has failed to spot.

### **'Billionaire buyer'**

Now a Czech billionaire wants to buy the company and the board has recommended his offer to shareholders. Whatever his motivation it won't be a desire to improve the service to the public or working conditions. Leading Liberal Democrats have been silent throughout as they have been for some time on the future of our postal services. I am probably not the only one who senses a reluctance to talk about an issue which inevitably leads to references to the key role played by Lib Dem ministers in the privatisation of the company.

I have no desire to go over old ground as by the end of the first decade of the 21st Century all three main parties supported privatisation in some form. If Labour had been returned in 2010 I am convinced they would have gone ahead with their previous plan.

What Liberals need now is a debate about the future of the nation's postal services which takes account of the changes shaping the sector. We need to look closely at new ownership models (something that is being talked about by the union), we need to examine the feasibility of separating the letter delivery service from parcels and whether a six day a week USO is still an essential requirement. Finally we need to look at how the various businesses interact to ensure quality of service is prioritised.

In 1994 the campaign to keep the industry in the public sector was called Stand By Your Post. Every Liberal Democrat MP supported that call and we had a proud record of advocating for the service particularly in opposition to office closures. Now it is time once again for Liberals to stand by our post.

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David Warren is a Lib Dem activist in Barnet. He worked in Royal Mail for 25 years and held a number of positions in the Communication Workers Union, formerly the UCW

# RUSSIA'S MINI ME

## Serbia is edging ever closer to Russia to the detriment of free elections and minority communities, says Ragmi Mustafi

The situation in Serbia has been a topic of discussion, especially in the context of its relationship with Russia. Recent reports suggest that Serbia is moving closer to Russia, with increased support for Putin and Russia among the Serbian government and public.

This shift is clear in various actions, such as Serbia not imposing sanctions on Russia, their signing agreements to consult each other on foreign policy issues, and increasing flights from Belgrade to Moscow. Additionally, Serbia has become a top location for Russian businesses and individuals in the tech industry looking to escape sanctions.

### SHARED ORTHODOXY

The growing political alliance between Serbia and Russia is rooted in a shared Slavic and Orthodox heritage, as well as a similar language. There is also a sense of resentment towards NATO due to historical events involving Kosovo and Ukraine.

Recently, the issues of free elections and disenfranchisement have played a significant role in Serbia's shift towards authoritarian governance and its waning enthusiasm for policies that align with European integration.

The ruling party, Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), led by Aleksandar Vučić, was declared the winner in the snap parliamentary and local elections held on 17 December.

Opposition parties accused President Vučić of election fraud, particularly in the capital, Belgrade. The state election commission rejected the opposition's complaints, and the Constitutional Court is yet to rule on the dispute.

But the Ad hoc Committee of the Bureau of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe [[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2024-0106\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2024-0106_EN.html)] also observed the elections and reported their findings of irregularities, including media bias, improper

influence by President Vučić, and voting irregularities such as 'vote buying' and 'ballot box stuffing'. The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE/ODIHR) stated that the elections were technically well-administered but dominated by President Vučić's involvement. The ruling party's systemic advantages created unjust conditions<sup>1</sup>.

At the other hand the European Parliament expressed concern over the election process and passed a 'Motion for a European Parliament resolution on the situation in Serbia following the elections' [[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-9-2024-0134\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-9-2024-0134_EN.html)] on 5 February. It called for a thorough investigation into the reported irregularities. The resolution emphasises the importance of fair and transparent elections in Serbia. It serves as a reminder to Serbia that fair elections, respect for democratic principles, and adherence to EU norms are vital for advancing Serbia-EU relations.

But what is interesting on election day, many Belgrade residents noticed an unsettling sight: people arriving at neighbourhoods polling stations who seemed unfamiliar with their surroundings.

It became clear that Serbs from other parts of the country and from neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina as well Kosovo were being driven around Belgrade to vote in organised groups. Videos and reports documented this phenomenon, raising concerns about the integrity of the electoral process. [<https://www.occrp.org/en/investigations/as-europe-urges-reform-in-serbia-local-election-observers-point-to-state-machinery-behind-vote-rigging>],

In Serbia, the administrative practice of not registering displaced persons, and address 'passivisation' has emerged as a subtle yet potent tool of (dis)enfranchisement, particularly affecting elections, and the Albanian minority. The challenges faced by this community are manifold, but this administrative

practice has raised significant concerns regarding its implications for civil rights and democratic participation: the passivisation of addresses.

This policy cancels the valid identity documents of citizens deemed to be non resident but many reports from civil society and international organisations show evidence that it is used

<sup>1</sup> European Union in Serbia. (2023). Key findings of the 2023 report on Serbia. Retrieved from <https://europa.rs/key-findings-of-the-2023-report-on-serbia/?lang=en>

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primarily to discriminate against Albanians who live or work abroad, and even those who live in Serbia.

This policy, a bureaucratic measure, has led to the inadvertent displacement of numerous Albanians, effectively making them invisible within the electoral system. Without a valid ID a person loses all of the rights that they have as a citizen as ID is needed to exercise any such rights.

Discriminatory practices related to the abuse of the residence law, specifically the passivisation of home addresses first and foremost have been raised by Albanian Minority Council for citizens belonging to the Albanian minority in Serbia.

In the period from July to September 2023, the Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR) conducted research in the municipalities of Bujanovac, Preševo, and Medveđa. Researcher Dr Flora Ferati-Sachsenmaier has systematically researched and raised the issue and claimed the Serbian government is systematically erasing Albanians from the registry in the Presheva Valley, which Albanians predominantly inhabit.

## **ADMINISTRATIVE LIMBO**

The gravity of this issue is underscored by the fact that an address serves as more than just a location marker; it is a gateway to citizenship rights, social services, and, crucially, the right to vote. When an address is passivised, the individuals associated with it are plunged into a state of administrative limbo, often without their knowledge, until they attempt to exercise their rights, such as voting, only to find they are no longer recognised as residents or constituents. Many returning home have even been stopped at the border to say their documents are not valid.

So beyond electoral concerns, address passivisation has broader social implications. Displaced individuals face difficulties accessing public services, healthcare, and education. The loss of a registered address has, in many cases, led to job insecurity and hindered social mobility.

The Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia called it “ethnic cleansing” by administrative means in a 2021 report. In just one municipality alone, more than 4,000 Albanians were removed from the registry. The European Parliament is also aware of the issue, and in March 2023, a resolution noted deep worry about the allegations. They called for independent and thorough investigations, although to date, nothing further has happened.

The treatment of minorities reflects the democratic character of the state. Similarly, the administration of elections provides insight into the state’s inclinations. These two aspects serve as indicators of the state’s commitment to political pluralism, the promotion of justice and equality, and the respect for ethnic and cultural diversity within civil society. Fair treatment of minorities and a transparent, free electoral process form the bedrock of a society built on democratic principles.

Serbia is failing. Serbia is looking more and more as Russia. Finds itself at a crossroads. President Aleksandar Vučić has maintained close relations with Moscow, refusing to join

*“On election day, many Belgrade residents noticed an unsettling sight: people arriving at neighbourhood polling stations who seemed unfamiliar with their surroundings”*

Western sanctions against Russia despite the conflict in Ukraine. His actions have raised eyebrows, especially given Serbia’s stated aspirations for EU membership.

Critics argue that Vučić plays both sides, balancing between Europe and Russia. The international community closely watches his decisions, wondering whether he will fully align with Europe or continue hedging. The delicate balance between East and West remains precarious, and Serbia’s hopes for EU membership hang in the balance. As geopolitical tensions persist, the international community grapples with how to respond to Serbia’s evolving position. In relation to discrimination against national minorities much more needs to be done.

After years of little attention to these issues by the international community (with the exception of some Embassies and international organisations), Albanian politicians from south Serbia have united to step up lobbying and awareness raising in America. In contrast to the constant politically orchestrated tensions in North Kosovo where the Serb minority are instrumentalised by Belgrade, south Serbia on the border with Kosovo is entirely peaceful. The North of Kosovo gets a disproportionate amount of attention but resentment against discrimination by the ruling party in Belgrade, and its failure to honour agreements within Serbia, is building especially among citizens denied rights.

I have joined delegations of ethnic Albanian political leaders to highlight these issues at the highest levels in Washington, including to Congressmen and Senators, cross party, and to the deputy assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian Affairs, Gabriel Escobar.

The United States and European Union are receiving the evidence of breaches of rule of law. Engagement with Serbia must focus on it implementing its own constitution, not only its ties with Russia and China.

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

# TIME TO DROP THE PR JARGON

## The Liberal Democrats should be talking about electoral reform in terms people can understand, says Chris Bowers

It was about 15 years ago, in those halcyon days when the Liberal Democrats had more than 60 MPs, that we stopped talking about Europe.

At a campaigning level, the view took root that Europe didn't really move the pulse of the electorate, so we had to concentrate on the issues that did. We were even instructed not to campaign on Europe in the European elections.

It would be wrong to blame that shift for Brexit, but we certainly share in the guilt for the referendum defeat in 2016. Not just the awful Remain campaign, but the fact that we assumed for so many years that the case for Britain's membership of the EU was rock solid that we stopped making it. Little by little, the anti-EU movement ate away at that assumption, until it was too late to stop it.

The road back from Brexit will be a long and slow one, but meanwhile I wonder whether we're making the same mistake with another core Liberal issue, voting reform.

A proportional voting system has been party policy since the 1920s, but only recently have we got close to our goal. For years, the two main parties, who at times hoovered up more than 90% of the votes, justified first-past-the-post (FPTP) with a convenient argument: it created strong governments.

### **KNOCKED ON THE HEAD**

Over the past 15 years, that argument has been knocked on the head. Of the four general elections in that time, two have produced hung parliaments, and of the other two, only one delivered a resounding majority (on 44% of the vote) – and that led to the most chaotic government in decades. Meanwhile, Labour's membership has embraced PR, even if the dinosaurs in Labour's leadership still cling to the average five years in every 20 that FPTP gives it power.

So conditions ought to be ripe for proportional representation, yet just at this very moment, the Lib Dems are rather switching off from the argument. Very little about electoral reform will feature in the manifesto (even though 'fair democracy' is listed as the fifth pillar of the party's 'Fair Deal' slogan), even less will feature in the party's campaign messaging, and if you ask any of the leading figures around Ed Davey why they aren't publicly making the case for voting reform, the reply is always a version of "We're focused on winning seats, not being a debating society."

There's an understandable aim behind this stance. For a party that won 50+ seats in the first three elections of this century, languishing around 10 is unacceptably low. So the target seats strategy being deployed for the 2024 general election makes sense. But it is being pursued to a degree that is robbing the party of any profile in terms of what it stands for.

This risks us making the same mistake as we made on Europe: failing to make the case for something we really believe in. And it could mean we squander the chance to get fair votes over the next few years.

There are very few windows for electoral reform; they generally come around every 15-or-so years. There was potentially one in 1974 when the February election delivered a hung parliament. There might have been one in 1992 but the Conservatives squeezed home. A big chance came in 1997 when Paddy Ashdown and Tony Blair had the wherewithal ready for introducing 'Alternative Vote Plus', but Labour's majority meant Blair couldn't deliver it, and his confidence that Labour would be in power for a generation meant he never saw the need for PR when in power.

The referendum of 2011 on the 'Alternative Vote' (not a particularly proportional system) reinforced the argument that voting systems don't excite the public, though that doesn't mean people are averse to PR. Voting reform simply wasn't a strong enough issue for the referendum to be fought on its own terms, so, like council and European elections, votes were used to bash unpopular politicians without risking a change of government.

These days there is reason to believe that Labour might, in the right circumstances, grant PR. The Tories would rather be in opposition than concede it, such is the benefit they derive from FPTP, but Labour has both fairness and ideological reasons for supporting it, as its members have realised even if its leadership hasn't.

So the ideal scenario for PR is for Labour to fall just short of an overall majority. The Tories' abysmal performance over the past three years has made a Labour majority at this year's election not just possible but likely. That would postpone the next window for voting reform, but not eliminate it. At some stage in the next 10 years, possibly just three, Labour will find itself deeply unpopular and no longer able to blame the Tories for the mess they inherited. At that point voting reform will come back into view while Labour still has a majority – and that's when we have to be ready.

To be ready, we don't just need to talk about voting reform, we need to give it a makeover. It needs to become less technocratic and more socially valuable. There must be no talk of 'proportional representation', perhaps not even of 'electoral reform' (except in articles like this one), and still less of 'single transferable vote', 'additional member system', 'regional list top-up models', and such like.

The argument for PR that will most impress Labour is that it will ensure the socially progressive measures a Labour government introduces would be far less likely to be unravelled

when the Tories get back into power. In fact the Tories would probably only get back if they had the support of another party, which would act as a brake on extremist ideas. PR would be the single most progressive measure a Labour government could enact.

The slogan 'Britain's politics is failing us' is far more powerful in the context of electoral reform than anything to do with greater proportionality, especially if the case for cooperation in government to deter extremism is made in parallel. It's a slogan people can readily identify with, but – and this part is crucial – we must ensure that a better and fairer voting system becomes seen as a solution to failing politics.

Most of Labour's trumpeted reservations can be dealt with. Labour politicians frequently say they don't object to PR per se, but they don't want to break the link with the constituency MP.

They don't have to. The systems used in Scotland and Wales are currently based on single-member constituencies, just with additional members so residents don't have one MP they have to approach if they have an issue.

And this leads on to another part of the makeover: we mustn't talk about voting systems, but "the system used in Scotland", "the system used in Wales", "the system used in Ireland" etc. We must get away from the jargon and make it clear this is not some foreign-based invention that clashes with British culture but a long-standing part of the UK landscape.

## SORE LOSERS

As well as eschewing jargon, there is one other thing we must not do: make this about fairness towards the Liberal Democrats and small parties. Frankly, my dear, people don't give a damn. This is why the "FPTP gives clear majorities" argument endured – most people don't care whether certain political parties get a raw deal, all they care about is that their government works, so telling them that one party is blatantly disadvantaged by the voting system cuts no ice (worse, it makes us look like sore losers).

Much better to link voting reform to the equalities agenda. Who in Labour, the Lib Dems, Greens, even many parts of the Conservative Party could possibly disagree with equal rights for women, equal rights regardless of racial heritage, and equal rights for disabled people who have lots to give despite their disability? Yet somehow it's OK that my vote is worth more than yours because I live in a marginal constituency and you're in a safe seat. That should be abhorrent, but we are not making the argument.

Picture a possible advert. Four photos of faces, three smiling, one glum. Top left is a woman with the text, "This is Phoebe, she suffered discrimination as a woman for years, until the law changed and she was finally paid the same as men." Top right is a man with the text, "This is Rashid, he suffered discrimination because he's not white, until the law made it illegal to treat black and minority ethnic people differently." Bottom left is a man in a wheelchair with the text, "This is James, he uses a wheelchair and missed out on several jobs until it became illegal to cite his disability unless it stopped him doing a job he was applying for." Bottom right is a woman, the glum-faced one, with the text, "This is Jane. She has voted eight times, but none of them have counted as she lives in a safe Tory seat. Who is fighting for her right to a fair vote?"

This is the kind of makeover the campaign for PR needs. And we must do it, because sometime in the next few years the door we've been banging on that has remained resolutely shut will open a fraction. That's why we need to be ready, so it becomes impossible for a struggling Labour government to resist it, and it doesn't need a referendum to pass the legislation.

*“Conditions ought to be ripe for proportional representation, yet just at this very moment, the Lib Dems are rather switching off from the argument”*

Part of being prepared for this moment is to have a workable system of PR that can be enacted for UK elections quickly, without getting bogged down in a time-consuming boundary review.

Liberal Democrats for Electoral Reform [<https://www.lider.org>] have shortlisted three systems, all of them familiar and in use in the UK, including the party's preferred system, single transferable vote. They also have a draft bill of the legislation needed to get PR through parliament with minimum delay.

But the best preparations are no use if we don't win the political argument. It's true that voters don't put voting systems high up their priority list, and no, voting systems don't directly put meals on the table, which is a valid argument in a cost-of-living crisis. But PR is a massive enabling measure for a healthier democracy and better governance, and in a broken political system, there's a premium for a party that speaks enthusiastically about what it believes in.

We need to speak passionately about fair votes, equal votes, about how politics isn't working, and how an equalities agenda that leaves the votes of some people worth less than a few hundred thousand voters in the swing constituencies belongs in the dark ages, not a 2020s democracy.

It doesn't prevent us concentrating on our target seats, but it would help give us an identity as a party offering people a voice who are currently denied it in broad daylight by our supposedly democratic system.

If we can't make that case, then what are we for?

---

Chris Bowers is a former Liberal Democrat district councillor and four-time parliamentary candidate.

## REMEMBERING RAY ATKINS

*Dear Liberator,*

Ray Atkins became involved at a young age with Cheadle Liberals and helped in the election of Michael Winstanley there in 1966.

Whilst at university he was very active in the Young Liberals, helping Michael Steed in the 'Red Guard' 1968 Brierley Hill by-election, ending up in hospital with a broken ankle.

Ray's first paid work for the party was as organiser for Colne Valley, paving the way for Richard Wainwright to regain the seat in 1974. During the two 1974 elections Ray was agent for Cheadle achieving a decent second place. Then Ray was organiser for Berwick on Tweed, helping Alan Beith to hold the seat in 1979.

In the early 1980s Ray was taken on as political consultant for Stockport Councillors numbering six or seven; Ray saw our group grow to be the largest group on the Stockport Council of about 22. In 1999 our group gained control of the council, with Ray playing a significant role.

In 1990 Ray was asked to be the agent in the first Bootle by-election of that year soon after the Liberals and SDP had merged to form the Liberal Democrats. The Lib Den candidate secured 3,179 but the Owenite breakaway SDP attained a mere 155 votes, resulting in them announcing that the Owenite SDP national campaigning would cease. Removing a big thorn in the side of the newly formed Liberal Democrats was something which Ray was always very proud of.

Ray and his second wife Liz (or Beth) settled in New Mills where after a while Ray was elected to High Peak and Liz to Derbyshire. Both only lost their seats in the most recent rounds of local elections.

Andy Hyde  
Cheshire

## KEEP CALM AND TALK ON

*Dear Liberator,*

For understandable - if wrong - reasons, Liberal Democrats have built themselves the myth of an 'enemy within' in the shape of 'TERFs' (trans-exclusionary radical feminists) - an insult subsequently adopted with pride by those being attacked.

TERFs do not hate Trans people, nor do they wish to see them excluded from public life, harassed, overlooked for promotion - and especially, would never wish violence or death upon them.

Looking back over Facebook discussions in Liberal Democrat groups over the last few years, TERFs have been shut out of committees, had roles removed, told they should shut up, and even told they should die. The tone of gleeful gloating has been intensely unpleasant.

Merely calling for calm debate and looking at both sides can be enough to have a pile of angry vitriol poured over you and your reputation.

To be clear, here are some of the things TERFs believe: including male people on all-female quotas for party roles, including PPCs, is misogyny by the back door; including male people in female-only spaces is dangerous and an affront to women's dignity and privacy, in some cases their religious beliefs, and in a few cases, their physical safety.

The point is not that trans people may assault or intimidate women, rather that predatory men will falsely purport to be trans to gain access to places where women are vulnerable.

Also, children should be encouraged to experiment with gender in the sense that neither toys nor clothes are restricted to one sex or the other, but telling them, for example, that a girl can escape her imminent puberty by taking drugs is dangerous; human beings cannot change sex.

I am perfectly willing to bet that these views are held by the majority of Liberal Democrat party members. However having seen the anger and the hatred shown towards anyone who has dared to voice one or more of these opinions, it is not a surprise that so few have dared to do so.

This is shameful. As the party of Mill and indeed Paddy Ashdown, this dereliction of our collective commitment to free speech and robust debate is not just a stain on our history, it may well be the end of the party, unless we do something about it.

I bear no-one ill will. Let's all resolve to shake hands and accept everyone. Feel free to speak our true minds on this issue. And then we can all breathe again.

Martin Eggleston  
Oxford West and Abingdon

# PASS IT ON!

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on to other liberals



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**Ten Years to Save the West.**  
**By Liz Truss. Backbite**  
**Publishing £20.00**

In most cases, if a prime minister took eleven times the length of their time in office to write their account of it, they would have had to live to be very old to see it published.

Of course, as in so many other ways, Liz Truss is the exception to the rule. Her book appeared only 18 months after her 49-day premiership. Mind you, that should be plenty of time for her to reflect on what she did that meant it all went so wrong. But no: that is not her approach to it, or, indeed, to any aspect of her political career. Instead, we have a catalogue of reasons why she was thwarted at every stage.

Writing about her time in Downing Street and the disastrous Kwarteng budget, she writes that she faced “a distinct shortage of expert voices supporting our agenda. Broadcasters and press alike struggled to find economists and commentators who could explain what we were trying to do.”

I assume that she was writing that with a straight face, so perhaps she should heed the words of Oliver Cromwell and “in the bowels of Christ think it possible [she] might be mistaken”. However, in Trussworld there is no room for any such self-doubt. It was all the fault of the economic establishment, the OBR, the markets, the Bank of England, the Treasury, the civil service and, in all probability, Larry the cat.

Blaming others is a major feature of this book. For Truss, those who opposed her were drawn from a range of vested interests – the ‘blob’ of teachers, educationalists and bureaucrats whose experience of education consisted of more than merely going to school; as Lord Chancellor a “left-wing legal establishment” which seemed to object to the Government’s frequent breaking of the law (it seems to have escaped Truss’ attention that, while Parliaments may make laws, Governments may not break them. Mind you we now have in our current Wonderland, a situation when Parliament is prepared to legislate that black = white after a court ruling that it is not.)

Only in post in the Department of Justice for 11 months, Truss was thankfully not able to introduce her favoured American-style system of politicians appointing judges. She fails to appreciate a difference between political accountability and political interference. She claims institutional obstruction prevented her attempts at prison reform,



# REVIEWS



yet Rory Stewart was to have success as prisons minister through a more conciliatory approach.

Then she moved/was demoted to chief secretary at the Treasury and ceased to be a team player – “I upset my Cabinet colleagues by publicly criticising their unconservative policies” and used social

media to plough her own furrow. She moved to advocating a no-deal approach to Brexit and became the first minister to back Johnson once Theresa May stepped down.

Appointed as trade secretary, Truss signed trade deals with North Macedonia, Moldova, Egypt, Mexico and

a host of other countries. Pity about no deal with the US (which she wanted) or China (which she did not) and relations with the EU were, of course, problematic. But a deal with Australia resulted in “young people able to travel freely... and services freely exchanged”. Just a shame it needed a journey of over 9,000 miles to do this, as against about 25 miles to mainland Europe. However, any failures to deliver were, again, entirely the fault of others.

Her final appointment before her premiership was as Johnson’s foreign secretary. A period dominated by Covid and the Ukraine war, she was “impressed by the calibre of many of the officials” but they were infected by “the modern government culture of risk aversion and HR-ification” with a “messianic zeal for net zero and handwringing do-goodism”, and her resistance to this led to her attempt to cancel COP26 (“a hot-air fest”). She rejoices in securing the release of Nazarin Zaghari-Ratcliffe but does not mention this was done only by paying the £400m to Iran which had been owing since a court judgement in 2001. Hardly a great diplomatic triumph.

And then... astonishingly, she became prime minister and the rest is a very short paragraph in history.

There is much to mock in Truss’ career but underlining it all is a simplistic view of politics and its relationship with society. “Politics is how we translate the will of the voters into action. It’s democracy”.

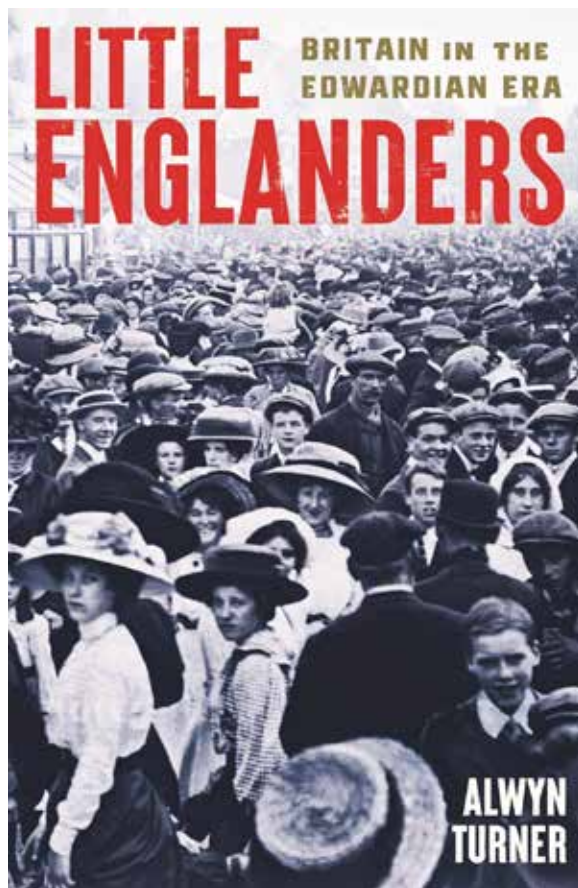
No, it’s not. That is populism – one of the most dangerous developments in current political life. Politics is about leading and taking others with you. The second part of the previous sentence is where Truss’ career foundered. As the old saying goes, a leader without followers is just a person going for a walk. That people did not follow in the direction she wanted is due, she argues, to wokery, environmentalist dogma, left-wing ideology, vested interests and a resistance to change. It’s more likely to be that they simply did not want to go in the direction she was heading.

Nick Winch

### **Little Englanders: Britain in the Edwardian Era. By Alwyn Turner. Profile Books. £25**

Every now and then a Lib Dem friend or two will say to me that they wish we could be bolder policy-wise as a party.

Whether or not the Liberal Democrats will get a chance to put their policies into



practice nationally any time soon is debatable, but we can at least be proud of the achievements of the last Liberal peacetime government, as a new history of Edwardian Britain reminds us.

Alwyn Turner has made a name for himself with acclaimed histories of Britain in the 1970s, 1980s and beyond, which place more emphasis on the popular culture of the day than many history books. Now he’s turned his attention to that short but eventful period between the death of Queen Victoria and the outbreak of the Great War in 1914.

When Henry Campbell-Bannerman became Liberal leader in 1899, *The Times* quoted some militant Liberals who predicted that he would turn out to be “a warming-pan from which neither light on not heat can be expected”. But observes Turner, “there are times when a warming-pan prime minister is precisely what the nation needs, supplying calm reassurance at a time of radical change. And the Liberal government [of 1906-14] was truly radical”.

One of its first, if now largely forgotten, measures on assuming office was the Education (Provision of School Meals) Act which allowed local authorities to levy a special halfpenny rate in order to provide lunches for poor children – and, as a result, by 1910 the London County Council was providing nearly 8.0m meals

a year at more than 800 of the schools under its control.

A much better-known piece of Edwardian Liberal legislation was the introduction of old age pensions, a measure which ‘wrong-footed’ the Tories and showed that the Liberals were “no longer the part of laissez-faire economics”, writes Turner, a historian with an eye for the telling detail, who goes on to record the reaction across the country to the introduction of the (admittedly modest) state pension on 1 January 1909.

A giant bonfire was lit on White Horse Hill, Wiltshire, to mark the occasion, the town band paraded the streets of Braintree, Essex, playing *Hail, Smiling Morn*, and many Liberal Party branches held celebratory teas for pensioners. Altogether some half a million people benefited from the new pension, including, notes Turner, a 91-year-old ex-soldier who’d been on duty for Victoria’s coronation and a 104-year-old who could remember her brothers going off to fight Napoleon.

The other big piece of legislation for which the Liberal government of the time is remembered is Lloyd George’s ‘People’s Budget’ (a term coined by the Liberal-supporting *Daily News*) in which he proposed to introduce a super tax on the rich, and a land tax which would hit land-owning aristocrats, to pay for the cost of building Royal Navy dreadnoughts and funding a National Insurance (health and unemployment) scheme.

As anyone who has studied the era knows, the Tory-controlled House of Lords rejected the budget, triggering two general elections in 1910, and it was only after the Liberals – led by Asquith – won the second poll, albeit by the skin of their teeth, that the People’s Budget was finally enacted in 1911.

The big surprise for me was learning just much of a Marmite figure Lloyd George was at the time. Progressive papers like the *Daily Chronicle* might have approved of his budget but the *Daily Express* dubbed it the ‘Red Flag Budget’, the *Evening Standard* called it “the beginning of a socialistic revolution”, and the *Western Morning News* thought that LG – the dominant political force of the era, says Turner – was resolved “to introduce communism into this country”.

There is much else to engage the reader besides politics, and I particularly enjoyed the passages on the changing

face of Fleet Street, the cultural phenomenon that was music hall (Marie Lloyd was the era's 'Queen of the Music Hall') and Horatio Bottomley, the East End-born chancer turned millionaire fraudster and maverick Liberal MP.

All in all, a must-read for anyone interested in Edwardian Britain and the achievements of its landmark Liberal government. Surely destined to be voted one of the history books of the year.

York Membery.

For a PDF of his dissertation, *The Making of Orpington: British Political Culture and the Strange Revival of Liberalism, 1958-64*, see: [yorkmembery.com](http://yorkmembery.com)

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### **Luka. By Ian Bancroft, on Amazon £6.99 paperback, £0.99 Kindle:**

'Luka' is set in an unidentified country where decades of intermittent wars have blighted life. The author has years of experience working in the Balkans, so it is safe to say the war zone he describes is loosely based on the former Yugoslavia. However, there is no rationale or ideology behind the endless conflict in 'Luka'. In this respect it resembles Gulliver's Travels.

Yet this is a raw and realistic portrayal of how civilian lives are destroyed in war, including the long-term effects of rape and torture (Luka is the name of the Omarska-type concentration camp), the inability to secure real justice and the fear hanging over every interaction. The story is told through the interlocking narratives of several characters who are known only by their initials, in the style of Kafka.

Bancroft writes beautifully, making this literary fiction rather than a racy war thriller. His use of prose is delicate and offers acutely observed aspects of humanity in crisis. Paradoxically, many of the world's current wars are firmly rooted in ideology, but this hardly matters when you are a civilian on the wrong end of a sniper's bullet.

Rebecca Tinsley

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### **Vienna. By Richard Cockett, Yale University Press**

Vienna was central to the invention of what we think of as the 20th Century, for good or ill. From the invention of psychotherapy to the first socialist public housing schemes to neo-liberal economics to Hollywood's greatest directors to the fitted kitchen to the Nazis, the Austrian capital has left an oversized mark on the modern world.

The Economist magazine's Richard Cockett paints a vivid picture of a pre-World War One city of coffee house

intellectuals, self-taught scientific geniuses, avant guard artists, architects, designers, composers, and radical social reformers. Many of them were from Jewish families who embraced *bildung* or self-improvement through education. Those who had not escaped by 1934 were hounded out of their professions by avaricious Aryans seeking promotion. Many met a grisly end in the Nazi death camps.

Austria's loss was Hollywood's gain: Billy Wilder, Fritz Lang, Erich Korngold and Max Steiner, among others, challenged the prevailing prudish and irony-free culture. Likewise American business was boosted by the arrival of social scientists (many of them women) who invented the use of focus groups, consumer surveys, management theory, media studies and along the way invented the shopping mall and the concept of attractive shop window displays. America's colleges and research establishments like RAND benefited from Vienna's physicists, biologists and doctors.

Cockett is particularly strong on the Viennese thinkers – Popper, Hayek, Wittgenstein, Polanyi, Drucker – who had such an impact on philosophy, economics and business in their adopted homes, the UK and USA. Their ideas continue to inform today's advocates of the free market, corporatism, interventionism and individual liberty.

Following the First World War, social democrats created Red Vienna with the world's first large-scale public housing schemes, although they failed to ask the inhabitants for their opinion on how units should be designed. Tragically, it turned out that the café philosophers of Red Vienna lacked the killer instinct when confronted by the boot boys of Black (fascist) Vienna.

However, those lucky Red Vienna thinkers and social reformers who escaped in time found new horizons in the USA. "The Viennese who worked within the American capitalist system were able to draw on an almost inexhaustible reserve of skills and disciplines that had been developed in Red Vienna, originally to further the cause of socialism...applying new techniques and modes of thinking to almost every aspect of commerce and business, from public relations to design, from marketing to venture capital, from advertising to entrepreneurship, from shop design to consumer behaviour."

Following World War Two, Cockett's focus remains on the Viennese emigres to the UK and USA. This is a pity: I recall

how narrow and mean Austria was in the 1980s, reduced to being a living museum. Nursing melange or café mit obers in cafes, the shrewish widows of enthusiastic Nazis cast their bitter and resentful gaze at a world that had moved on. Happily, Vienna is much improved by the arrival of migrants from the former Hapsburg empire following the fall of the Berlin Wall. Yet, the chasm between sophisticated, tolerant Vienna and the far-right-voting Austrian provinces is as wide as it was 120 years ago.

Rebecca Tinsley

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### **The Idea of Prison Abolition. By Tommie Shelby. Princeton University Press 2023**

This is a book about the total abolition of prisons. Strangely, it is not written by a prison abolitionist. It is a thought experiment by a Harvard philosophy professor, who considers the arguments put forward by abolitionists and assesses whether they have any advantage over what could be achieved by simply reforming prisons.

Prison abolition is an interesting topic, but the way it is presented in this book is slightly tortured. It is more like an academic brainteaser than a book. Shelby spends a lot of pages explaining what prison abolitionists think, and also imagining how they would respond to various criticisms he raises. He then goes on to conclude that abolition is (a) unnecessary; and (b) impossible without wider societal reform.

The structure would have been a lot simpler if he had said: "I believe in prison reform, but it is worth considering whether prisons are salvageable as an institution or whether they should be abolished altogether," and then got on with his analysis. Instead, you have to wade through lots of material where Shelby tries to faithfully explain a position that he does not agree with. Perhaps this is an academic style favoured at Harvard School of Philosophy, so I have tried to look past it and consider the substance.

Although the particular viewpoints presented by Shelby seem quite niche, and barely merit an entire book dedicated to analysing them, the pros of prison abolition are a serious topic to consider. Prisons, and in particular large-scale incarceration as we know it today, are a modern phenomenon. For most of human history, other forms of punishment were used. We need to know why prisons were established and what we are aiming to do with them so we can

assess whether they are working or capable of reform. And as much of prison reform is about reducing the size of prison populations, alternative forms of punishment need to be considered. If we do not consider these issues, we cannot know which crimes (if any) require incarceration and cannot be dealt with through other means.

Shelby does a good job of considering these issues, although arguably he could have done more if he had not spent so much time setting out the abolitionist views. He also places prisons within context in society and suggests that more needs to be done to prevent crime, including structural reform, if prisons are to become superfluous. His views are measured, thoughtful and easy to understand.

This is a strong book on an important topic; I would recommend it for any advocate of prison reform to test the extent of reform that they wish to see.

Eleanor Healy-Birt

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### **Wuhan, a documentary novel.** **By Liao Yiwu. Polity 2024** **£28.00 e-book £22.99**

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic brought significant impact to everyone. Being the first country affected, those living in China had an unpleasantly unique experience, and Liao Yiwu has tried to elaborate how the pandemic affected the Chinese society through a story and expressed his views towards Chinese Community Party on Covid-19 and geopolitics.

This novel is about the main protagonist, Ai Ding, trying to return from Germany to Wuhan at the beginning of lockdown. Throughout the journey, he spoke with friends in Europe and his wife in Wuhan via Skype constantly and kept posting articles on his social media account. When he finally got home, he found out his wife passed away just days before because of Covid-19 and he was later arrested due to his social media posts on Covid-19, and later died in the detention centre.

The narrative approach would be a bit too dramatic to some, but through this extraordinarily journey, it covered the story of how Covid-19 impacted Chinese society on multiple levels. Some aspects were not even covered by any press or social media, Chinese or Western alike, such as the discriminations towards people with Wuhan origins among Chinese, tensions between Hubei province and the surrounding provinces due to being the source of the pandemic,

and, more importantly, how the pandemic affected the culture and identity of the ethnic and religious minority communities.

The author devotes chapter 10 to the different points of views on where the virus originated, and how it became a global pandemic. Through Ai Ding, the main protagonist, and Zhuangzi Gui, a main character in this novel, they had lively discussions over the articles on social media. Both were academics educated in European universities, but not in the medical sector. During the pandemic, Ai Ding was in China and Zhuangzi Gui was in Germany. The difference of their personal experiences resulted in their polarised views towards the pandemic. Ai Ding became more receptive towards the conspiracy theories, which argued the virus was created in P4 laboratory. Gui followed the scientific theories, which argued the virus cannot be created by laboratory, and could only arise through mutations. This chapter was a miniature of our society during the pandemic and how it affected our relationship during and beyond the crisis. Its impacts still existed, even in our political scenes.

Larry Ngan

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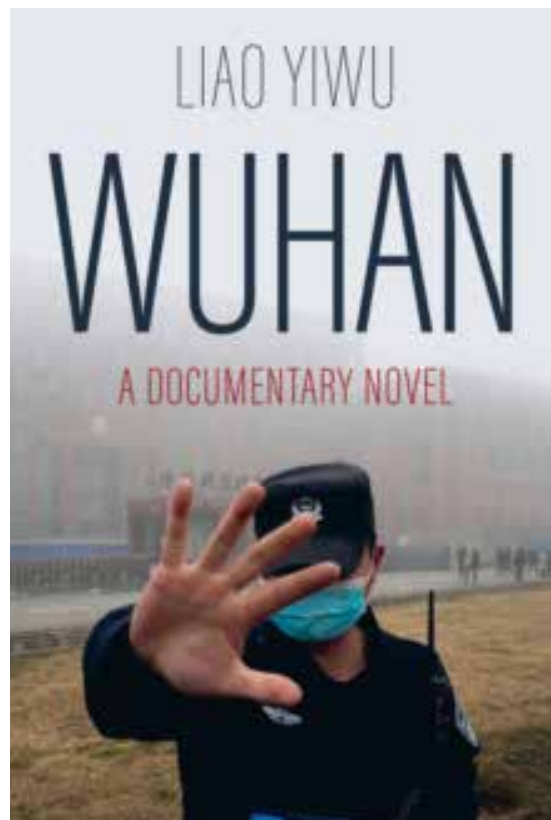
### **Anthony Moore** **[performance]**

To say Hastings is more than blest with the number and quality of musicians within its bounds is an understatement. May saw AKA., a number of familiar faces, at The Beacon.

Anthony Moore, known from his 1970s days, Slapp Happy and beyond, has collaborated with Necessary Animals Keith Rodway and Amanda Thompson on a number of occasions. Amanda provides supporting keyboards and vocals, and Keith, continuo. Copies of their new album, *Electromics*, made their public outing at the event, but the performance was dedicated to Moore's back catalogue.

Guest players were Tullis Rennie, experimental trombonist and senior lecturer at City University of London, Olie Brice, celebrated jazz bassist – you may recall his *Fire Hills*, of a year-or-so ago and can find it on Bandcamp, and Richard Moore, equally celebrated – you can join him fiddling at the Jenny Lind in the Old Town most Tuesdays.

No Parlez is perhaps Moore's best-known composition; it was picked up by



Paul Young in his first solo album of that name, after leaving the excellent Q-Tips. It is an important piece on the album, giving the edge and inspiration to what otherwise might be a batch of soul covers. Young was influenced by his producer Laurie Latham, who had worked with Moore, in his choice of the song. If you listen to Moore's early solo albums you should discern a wider influence on New Romantics and subsequent synth bands. However, Moore is out to recover *No Parlez* as his own.

The progressive music of the 1970s was never far from progressive politics, and it seems, remains the same. Moore introduced *Hymn to Despair*, which is a work in progress, dedicating it to the chief executive and others of Southern Water... you couldn't drown yourself, because you could never get your head beneath all the shit in the sea.

As might be expected, *The Beacon* was packed, not only in anticipation of Moore's back catalogue, but also his take on that work 40 years on. Moore was always at the avant-garde edge of progressive music, so an exciting and enjoyable evening was guaranteed for all.

*Electromics* is clearly something else. It is a run of 20 laser-cut albums, so you'll need to get in quick. It developed out of the rehearsal sessions Moore, Rodway and Thompson did for material premiered at Daniel Hartlaub's exhibition last summer at Electro Studios.

Stewart Rayment

### Monday

Well, I got back just in time, didn't I? Someone tipped me off that the government was offering a free holiday in Rwanda with plenty of spending money, so I put my hand up sharpish. It turned out that they were paying just for the outward flight, which was rather mean, but when the time came to head back to Rutland, I met an old Africa hand who took me by flying boat to Lourenço Marques, and I caught a jet home from there. The local firewater was potent and reasonably priced, so I arranged to have a few crates shipped over here – they should arrive at Oakham Quay in time to stiffen the sinews of Liberal Democrat canvassers in the final weeks of the campaign. The Wise Woman of Wing furnished me with a letter of introduction to a witch doctor of her acquaintance; he proved to be an Old Malburian – I imagine he found Africa pleasantly civilised after that. He kindly gave me some jackal bones with which to charm returning officers who look as though they are about to agree to a Conservative agent's request for a recount. The accompanying dance is already sweeping the nightspots of Rutland.

### Tuesday

Not surprisingly, the calling of a general election has turned things upside down on the Estate. In particular, my Home for Well-Behaved Orphans is besieged by political candidates of all stripes and sexes looking for a photogenic child or two to appear in the family photograph on their leaflets. (Any male candidate who wants a wife for the photo is referred to the Convent of Our Lady of the Ballot Boxes in a particularly remote part of High Leicestershire.) I do hope Matron has been off the gin in my absence, because her record-keeping can be a little slapdash. As a result, the 2005 general election saw the same child appear on leaflets in three neighbouring East Anglian constituencies, while in a Lowland seat the Labour and SNP candidates had been blessed with identical identical twins.

### Wednesday

To Vincent Square for a meeting of Ed Davey's campaign team. Freddie and Fiona explain that in the past we have made the mistake of winning too many votes. This time, our efforts will be concentrated in the more pleasant of the Home Counties – “the sort of places our schoolfriends' parents live”. I suggest that we look instead to Farron and his conversion of the mint cake workers of Kendal to Liberalism for inspiration, but it's clear F&F have Davey's ear.

### Thursday

If you ask my opinion, this 'DNA testing' is here to stay. Terribly Clever, don't you think? News reached me the other day that traces of a big cat have been found on a sheep's carcass in Cumbria. You will guess what my first thought was, but my agents have made extensive enquiries and established that Paul Tyler was nowhere near the lakes and fells at the time. As a result, I have alerted the ALDC to a possible hazard to deliverers with remote rural rounds and, remembering the unfortunate loss of a county councillor from Gloucestershire in David Steel's day, dispatched two of my sturdiest gamekeepers

# Lord Bonkers' Diary

on the Thames Clyde Express to mind the aforementioned Farron until the polls close on 4 July. Trust in God and don't forget your orchard doughty, as Cromwell would have put it.

### Friday

Who should be in the *Bonkers' Arms* this evening but our local side of morris dancers? We chuckle over the events of 23 April – the day before I flew to Rwanda. You may recall that Keir Starmer had written to Labour's general election candidates urging them to “fly the flag” and mark St George's Day “with enthusiasm”.

Hence the arrival of a couple of unfamiliar faces on the village green that Tuesday, for what could be a more appropriate way of celebrating England's patron saint than morris dancing? (Stabbing an iguana with a toasting fork, I suppose, but the villages where that rite is still observed are few and far between.) I'm afraid that, being morris virgins, our Labour visitors came off distinctly second best when the sticks began to fly. They may have limped away muttering about St George being Turkish and “cultural appropriation”, but it was good to see them Making An Effort.

### Saturday

Looking at the list of Liberal Democrats who have received the coupon from Freddie and Fiona, I find myself enormously encouraged. There's a woman who has rowed the Atlantic, which will come in useful if we need to make a quick getaway from Westminster, and a veterinary surgeon. I won't hear a word against Drs Winstanley, Tonge and Brand, but I have always rather envied my setters when I take them to our local vet. He doesn't ask them lots of damn-fool questions or tell them they are drinking too much. If this fellow gets in, I shall see if he will take me on his books. And don't tell F&F, but I may visit Sutton Coldfield to cheer on John Sweeney, not least because he now wears what appears to be Tony Greaves's old bobble hat. Perhaps it's passed from Liberal to Liberal like a family heirloom and was originally owned by Lord Morley?

### Sunday

I was sorry to hear of the death of Clarence 'Frogman' Willcock. His hits 'I Don't Know Why I Love You, But I Do' and 'I am a Liberal and I am Against This Sort of Thing' could always be relied upon to get the young people up and cutting a rug at fundraising dances here in my Ballroom. Talking of which, I have finally bitten the bullet and told Earl Russell that his father's Big Band was not scattered to 'the round earth's imagin'd corners', as I may have inadvertently given the impression, but has been living for years on one of the islands on Rutland Water. The aforesaid jazz musicians generally sport upon the shore in animal skins and play upon rude instruments of their own manufacture, occasionally accompanied by Meadowcroft (who can be pretty rude himself). Well, their next gig will not be on the shore but at the Royal Opera House, Oakham – I would have booked the skittle alley at the *Bonkers' Arms* the other day, but there are rather a lot of them.

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