

liberator



I hear it's the
Tories' next
conference venue

- 🔦 Five years to do what? - Paul Kohler MP, Marie Goldman MP, Calum Miller MP
- 🔦 Time to change Parliament's culture - Sarah Green MP
- 🔦 Why do the Lib Dems still ignore race? - Janice Turner

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COMMENTARY

STAYING PUT

Ed Davey's decision - if that is what it was - reported in the Guardian that he will stay leader for this parliament and fight the next general election deserved more notice than it got.

He is the party's seventh leader in 25 years, but this revolving door approach to leadership is not historically typical. Leaders did serve for longer; the preceding 25 years saw the party make do with only three leaders.

Assuming Davey stays it brings - barring some unforeseen event - stability at the top of the party and allows newly elected MPs to find their feet without worrying about internal coups.

It also means that those lucky or industrious enough to hold their seats at the next election would be able to stand for leader after that, creating a potentially wide field whereas before this year's general election that would have been very limited.

What though does Davey intend to do with his victory? Although both a Labour majority and Lib Dem gains were predictable their scale was not and so Davey is in the curious position of leading a parliamentary party of unprecedented size but with very limited scope to do anything at Westminster apart from promoting itself and embarrassing the government as best it can.

There have often been calls for MPs to "get out of the Westminster bubble" and instead "campaign in country", without any very specific suggestion about what they should actually do.

Is this the right time to plan for how they might campaign more widely, since there are far more MPs than are needed to fill formal shadow roles and committee posts?

It may be the demands of their newly-acquired constituencies leave them no spare time, but these are the party's main campaigners and if the Lib Dems want to expand further they must talk loudly about issues that resonates. It has made sewage spills its own topic, are there others to be found by MPs with ears to the ground?

NEW KID ON THE BLOCK

Can the Liberal Democrats come up with a way to defeat Reform?

Lib Dems normally relish by-elections and at some difficult times victories in them have rescued the party's profile and morale - Chesham & Amersham, Eastleigh in 2013 and Eastbourne in 1990 come to mind.

While the Green party has never organised effectively for by-elections, wherever this Parliament's first one comes Reform will be wanting to register its first gain

and can be counted on to pour in resources - possibly more financial than human - just as the Lib Dems do.

This may come to nothing if that by-election is in a seat that resembles those the Lib Dems hold, but it will if it's a Labour 'red wall' seat, where the Lib Dems have little presence, or somewhere where Reform lies second.

During the last Parliament such seats could be left to Labour to defend or seize its natural territory.

But governments become unpopular and if a by-election arises in a Labour area with no great Lib Dem presence what then happens with the Tories in meltdown? Reform gaining the coverage and general boost to credibility that a by-election gain brings would be an ugly sight.

This summer's far right-instigated riots showed a substantial - but not complete - overlap with places with the highest Leave votes in 2016.

While that does not mean all Leave voters are violent racists, it does indicate there are such people in deprived Leave voting areas, which are probably the most difficult territory there is for Lib Dems.

It may be tempting to regard the places at the centre of the riots as politically hopeless, and not worth more than a minimum of Lib Dem foot leather and money.

Tempting but misguided. Some thought about costs and opportunities is needed. Swathes of the country should not just be abandoned by a party that claims to be a national one.

There is a tendency for people concerned about such issues to call for the party to get 'stuck into' Labour areas.

That though begs the question 'stuck in with what'? Campaigning in deprived areas notoriously demands far more time and effort from party activists than does work in more affluent places - if only because they generate huge volumes of casework - and local fundraising opportunities are limited and burn-out among campaigners common.

There is a debate to be had. It may be the party concludes it cannot be everywhere and its prospects of success in Reform-minded areas are so improbable that there is little purpose in investing time and money there, however desirable that might be.

But it may also conclude that it wants to take the fight to Reform so as to close down opportunities for it (and further right parties that are even worse). If the latter there must be some detailed plan for money to be raised and people encouraged so this work is not left to sporadic and under-resourced local enthusiasm.

RADICAL BULLETIN

THERE FOR THE LONG HAUL

Ed Davey's 'finish the job' interview with the Guardian in July contained a significant but little remarked upon statement that he intends to stay as leader until at least the next general election.

Indeed, he was even considering which stunts might top those indulged in this year, such as taking up skydiving.

The Guardian said: "Confirming that he intends to lead the party into the next election, Davey said the party would again ruthlessly target so-called blue wall seats, traditionally Conservative areas where the Lib Dems have taken advantage of perceived Tory complacency and disaffection with the party's ideological direction."

Davey went on to say: "We need to finish the job at the next election," by removing the remainder of the 'blue wall'.

There had been speculation both that Davey's family circumstances meant he might not want to continue the burden of leadership, and that having delivered record results he would nonetheless want to continue.

If the latter is correct it means any leadership election would be unlikely until around 2029 by which time all kinds of people might be in contention including those who are newly elected and who hold their seats next time.

While deputy leader Daisy Cooper might have been a shoo-in had Davey gone early in this parliament, it looks like she will now have some competition.

MISSING MEMBERS

The catastrophe of 2015 was immediately followed by an unexpected surge in Lib Dem membership, which peaked in 2019 then fell away after Brexit took effect. The party stopped publishing a membership figure after this became embarrassingly low, but the party president election of 2022 unavoidably exposed a 64,671 total (since 9,099 votes were cast on a 14.05% turnout).

Has the triumph of 2024 and the period of local and by-election success leading up to it done anything for membership?

One cannot tell from wading through Reports to Conference. While members might conceivably already be acquainted with the fact there are now 72 Lib Dem MPs (which is repeatedly referred to) there is nothing about the membership total.

There is though a note that membership and subscription fees income rose to £1,611,890 from £1,486,233 the previous year.

But according to the report of the Federal Finance and Resources Committee this had little to do with recruitment as: "Membership income has recovered from 2021 due to a proactive policy of asking members

to increase their contributions."

It would appear increased income has been received but the membership total is still considered a suitable subject for silence.

BOGS, BIKKIES AND PEERS

It's that time of year when the Mitcham and Morden Commemorative Gold Toilet rouses itself for its travels to those who submit the worst motion for conference.

The toilet's first stop is the Young Liberals, as the agenda for their summer conference included a bizarre call to abolish the voting age so that "everyone should have the right to vote if they have the capacity to do so". Perhaps wisely it did not go into who should assess this capacity, or how.

That wasn't all. A motion that at root had a sensible concern with the pay and status of public servants was couched in terms of preserving the Ministry of Defence's budget for serving biscuits at meetings.

This included, as policy points: "The Government to resist calls for expenditure on biscuits to be cut further and to restore tea and biscuits in the Ministry of Defence.

"The Government to expand light refreshments across Government departments and look at other relatively low cost small ways of improving the work environment for civil servants."

The toilet will also be making a rare visit to an MP, in this case Melksham's Brian Mathew.

He submitted a motion titled 'Formation of a permanent royal commission for fairness in government'.

This body would be additional to ombudsmen, regulators and appeal courts and offer "a 'long stop' for when miscarriages of justice and maladministration have been allowed for whatever reason to fall through the cracks of government" with powers to refer cases back to these regulators "when it was considered that dubious decisions had been arrived at by these bodies, or where this had not happened have cases so investigated".

And who might do this? The motion makes the extraordinary suggestion that the commission should be staffed by crossbench peers with "a small legally trained secretariat"

Who would pick the peers concerned and on what basis would they be better qualified than ombudsmen and judges to deal with such cases? It doesn't say.

Federal Conference Committee said it rejected the motion due to the need for revision and "a narrow focus".

AN OFFER YOU COULD REFUSE

Something called Eryri Press contacted Lib Dem local parties in July offering to enter marked

register data for £385.

The party offers some free software to carry out this function or ALDC will do it for a similar fee that offered by Eryri.

Its advertisements led to a stern message from Lib Dem HQ telling local parties not to use Eryri as it is not authorised to handle data for the Liberal Democrats.

Eryri turns out to be run by Chris Twells, who was once simultaneously a Lib Dem councillor in Salford and Cotswold and now sits only on the latter and for the continuing Liberal party.

Twells contacted Liberator to make clear that he stood as a Liberal and not as an independent in the recent general election.

It remains less than clear how and why Twells and the Lib Dems fell out with each other, but he appears to wish to rejoin.

FLAP OVER BIRD

The Lib Dems must wish the Natalie Bird court case would go away now that the party has admitted it breached the Equalities Act by banning Bird from holding party office, and later took the rare step of asking the court to enter a judgment against it (Liberator 424).

Bird wore her controversial tee-shirt (Liberator 424) - interpreted by some as transphobic - in 2018.

The party's concession left open the question of damages and any remedy, which were to be decided on 21 August but that hearing was postponed due to the unavailability of a judge.

It is now expected in the autumn and Bird has said that the Lib Dems refuse to say whether or not she is a member and so she may or may not be at conference.

From the party side all that has come is an opaque statement that it has "decided not to spend money defending a case about our previous complaints system taken by Natalie Bird.

"We have already acknowledged the problems with that system by replacing it entirely with a new complaints system, run by different volunteers and supported by different staff."

A statement from Bird's solicitor, says the Lib Dems admitted to "direct discrimination because of her gender critical beliefs, indirect discrimination, victimisation and breach of contract".

Examples given by the law firm Branch Austin McCormick included subjecting Bird "to disciplinary proceedings, suspension and sanctions on the basis of a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010 [and] removing Natalie as prospective parliamentary candidate for Wakefield in September 2019 [and] failing or refusing to investigate Natalie's complaints of bullying and harassment by those bringing complaints against her."

Legal proceedings were still live when the conference agenda was compiled, which allowed the Federal Conference Committee to refuse to take a business motion about the Bird case.

That noted the admission made and the financial costs that the party has incurred and called on the Federal Board to ask the Federal Audit and Scrutiny Committee to review the case in detail and report with recommendations with a summary of these available at Spring Conference 2025.

Whether or not that happens a number of troubling

questions arise over how the party has handled this affair.

The party has disowned the old complaints system that was in force when the whole thing began in 2018 and was already in the process of replacing it, which happened the next year.

But it spent five years fighting a case in which it has ultimately conceded was brought under a disciplinary system it already considered deficient. Who decided to spend money and time in this way, and was legal advice on the issues that the party has now conceded taken at the time Bird's case was originally heard by a party panel? No doubt the answer will be a loud silence.

OPERATING WARD

The interminable saga of the expulsion of former MP David Ward has ended with him choosing to operate semi-detached from Bradford Lib Dems as an independent councillor.

Ward was MP for Bradford East from 2010-15 and was re-adopted as candidate in 2017.

He then said something related to Palestine - it has never become entirely clear what - that the Tory MP Eric Pickles claimed was anti-Semitic and a panicked Tim Farron had the candidates' office remove him as Bradford East candidate (see innumerable past Liberators).

Ward stood as an independent in 2017, soundly beating the official Lib Dem paper candidate, who had been imported from elsewhere as Bradford Lib Dems refused to select a candidate against Ward.

His membership was revoked for standing against an official candidate and since then Ward - backed by many eminent party figures in the region - has made repeated failed attempts to rejoin.

His latest such attempt in October 2023 was rejected, according to Ward because "although I was not antisemitic, the accusation that I was antisemitic by the right-wing press would damage the party and this meant that it was 'not in the best interests of the party' for me to be a member".

Since then Ward has decided to give up on reapplying to join and now sits as deputy leader of the independents on Bradford Council. The Lib Dems did not oppose him the most recent council election.

TROUBLED WATERS

What on Earth is going at Three Rivers, a council where the Lib Dems have held uninterrupted control for donkeys' years for the most part with huge majorities.

It covers the Rickmansworth and Chorleywood areas of Hertfordshire and although it has a Tory MP adjoins two Lib Dem seats.

Sara Bedford was a long-serving leader but stood down in 2020 citing health issues. Since then ructions within the group have seen her leave it to sit as an independent, though she remains in the county council's Lib Dem group.

Her husband Matthew Bedford - both are well known figures around the party - was a councillor for the same Abbots Langley ward and was elected deputy leader last May but then resigned from the council altogether. Embarrassingly, the Tories then won the by-election giving them a rare gain.

A row then ensued in which Sara Bedford said she

was banned from the Lib Dem councillors' Facebook group for asking why ALDC had not seen fit to issue its normal by-election round-up on Lib Dem Voice that week, the implication being that this would have had to cover the Three Rivers debacle and so was avoided.

INTERNATIONAL DISPUTE

When the Liberal Democrat Federal International Relations Committee (FIRC) became a committee in its own right - rather than a sub-committee of the old Federal Executive - several loose ends were left untied.

One of these was that FIRC does not have the power to put motions to conference, unlike other party committees, so leaving no straightforward route to raise international matters. Another is that the chair of FIRC does not sit on the Federal Board, unlike equivalents from other committees.

A motion from former party president Sal Brinton sought to remedy this but was rejected on the seldom-used ground that it was not in order. Her other motion on International Strategy and Arrangements was dismissed due to 'clarity of drafting'.

Brinton's motion contained a long exposition of the history of the party's international work, which might have seemed gratuitous, though it's not clear what was wrong with the standing order amendment to allow FIRC to propose motions. This all though leaves the party's international work unrepresented in its formal structures and FIRC unable to directly put anything to conference.

LIKE YOU DO

MP's maiden speeches usually comprise polite tributes to predecessors and descriptions of their constituencies.

Melksham's Brian Mathew used his to mention his opposition to the since scrapped Stonehenge tunnel project. He told the House of Commons that in this campaign he had "taken part in a number of water blessings with druids, shamans and interfaith practitioners". Will they go canvassing for him though?

TWO PEAS IN A PODCAST

Having presumably nothing better to do, former MPs Mark Oaten and Lembit Öpik have launched the Very Liberal Podcast, in which the two of them chat fairly tediously with much force jollity about current affairs. Socratic dialogue it ain't.

A blurb with it describes Oaten as having been MP for Winchester from 1997 "until his resignation in 2010", with no mention of what led to his downfall. He is also described as a regular contributor to right-wing headbanger channel GB News.

Öpik threw away the safe seat of Montgomery in 2010 having chosen to turn himself into a figure of public ridicule, and is described as "a familiar face on television and has appeared on Have I Got News For You, Come Dine with Me, Celebrity Coach Trip, and I'm a Celebrity...Get Me Out of Here!".

Reasons of space obviously did allow Öpik room to mention that he was last heard of giving speeches to Conservative gatherings on how to beat the Liberal Democrats (Liberator 412).

MASTER OF THE ROLLS

Former Haringey Lib Dem councillor Dave Winskill has developed an unusual interest in promoting consumer protection, The Times has reported.

It said Winskill discovered that toilet rolls he bought from Waitrose in his former Crouch End constituency appeared lighter than normal so he weighed them and found the new rolls 40% smaller than older ones.

Winskill complained and was offered "a £10 voucher and told that my views were very important". Fortunately "I was not about to start counting out the individual sheets", he said.

ONE MORE HEAVE

A members' newsletter from the National Liberal Club announces the creation of a "rapid feedback system" about the food served. Won't it make a mess on the carpets?

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WHAT WE DO NOW

To build on the 2024 result, Liberal Democrats must show they are the real opposition party and can challenge Labour authoritarianism, says Paul Kohler

Let's be honest, Ed was "only supposed to blow off the bloody doors" and no one seriously expected the Lib Dems to become the largest parliamentary third party in a century.

But now we've achieved, what the first-past-the-post system is designed to avoid, what's to be done? Particularly within a system underpinned by rules built on the premise only two parties will prevail and where the third party, no matter how large, is limited to little more than walk-on parts in much of the 'business of the House'.

That said, third parties in Westminster have significantly more rights than the also-rans that come behind them and it was consequently still important to regain third party status.

While who can begrudge the huge boost to party morale engendered by having done so in such style? But let's not kid ourselves everything from hereon is plain sailing. To some extent at least, we've got all the downsides of being a large parliamentary party with few of the advantages.

Big enough to show we're a credible political force and thereby raise expectations; but denied all but a very limited means of wielding the parliamentary power needed to fulfil such demands.

That is not a counsel of despair but just a warning we're not there yet and the next step is even most consequential than the last. If you thought 2024 required discipline you've seen nothing yet. In short our aim at the next election must be to finish the task we've started, by replacing the Tories as His Majesty's most loyal opposition; irrespective of whether they tack to the left or right; or Reform, like all Nigel Farage's previous ventures, sinks under the weight of his own ego.

LITTLE LOW-HANGING FRUIT

One of the downsides of our superb 2024 strategy of maximising the efficiency of our vote is that little of the low hanging fruit remains. The Lib Dems are now second in just 27 constituencies (well behind the Greens on 40 and Reform on 98). And all but four of those seats are Tory. In other words, what's left of the low hanging fruit in 2029 will still be blue. Yes, Labour will be sinking in the polls by then, but with just four exceptions we are not the challengers in their most vulnerable seats.

We consequently need to focus our sights on finishing off the Tories, where we are second, with a message that will also allow us to target the many Conservative seats where we are third behind, what will be, a retreating and defensive Labour party.

Even if successful, there are at least three dangers with such an approach. We might remain in third if Labour loses substantial ground to a resurgent and

unified populous Right. Colleagues in Labour facing constituencies are unlikely to welcome the prospect of another election in which we focus our fire on the Tories. We end up forsaking our progressive and liberal principles in pursuit of soft Tories.

To take each in turn. Ultimately, there's no point second guessing how the current psycho drama in the Conservative party, and the anticipated one in Reform, will play out.

Apart from the occasional provocation we can do little to influence the bloodletting and, whiet not uninterested, quite disinterested in the outcome. The only scenario that would likely impact our approach – namely a one-nation Tory party becoming the dominant force on the Right – seems so unlikely as to be discounted. Consequently, nothing they realistically do can, nor should, dictate how we prosecute our strategy; although I think it unlikely either the Tories or Reform will vanquish the other, nor harmony breakout betwixt them.

Absent the four seats in which we are the main challengers, our strategy against Labour must be to first engage them at a local, rather than parliamentary, level. As we have shown this year, local success is key to achieving a breakthrough in parliament; and the party must resource Labour-facing local parties who commit to such an approach.

We are nothing if we are not progressive and there is no point winning for the sake of winning, if we become Tory-lite in the process.

That, of course, is the danger inherent in the very strategy that got us to where we are today. The solution is consequently one we must pursue now, at the outset of this parliament, not just in five years' time, and to which the rest of this article is devoted.

The Lib Dem strategy must be to prove we, and not the Tories, are the real opposition. That requires us to be both more robust and more constructive than the official holders of the title.

That is something that has not been hard in the first few weeks, with a rudderless Conservative party drifting in the early calm; their parliamentary party showing little interest in the proceedings of the House, absent the occasional leadership contender making a cheap shot at the despatch box.

Things will presumably change a little when, what seems like an interminable leadership contest reaches its (anti?) climax. But despite the predictable calls for unity there seems little prospect of it breaking out; with some Tory MP's clearly sympathetic to Nigel Farage and his populist nonsense, with others appalled at the prospect of having anything to do with him and his gang.

This particular quintuplet of bad boys of Brexit, incidentally, sit directly behind us in the chamber, with Lee Anderson playing the role of the mouthy guy sat behind you at a football match telling anyone who will listen, and those trying not to, how everything should be done. Relations are cordial but as distant as you would imagine with the only matter that might unite us, electoral reform, unlikely (sadly) to take centre stage anytime soon.

So how should we play the next four or five years? Let's take the justice brief as an example as it neatly highlights the tensions within Labour and the opportunities and traps that lie in wait for us.

After years of misrule and mismanagement our prison and probation service is in crisis. In response to this, and as I acknowledged in my maiden speech, the prime minister should be warmly congratulated for appointing James Timpson as prisons' minister. There can be no one better than the chair of the Prison Reform Trust, who has walked the talk throughout his professional life with the Timpson retail chain's enlightened policy of employing ex-offenders, to lead a national debate on the future of prisons and the role of imprisonment.

James Timpson is on record as stating we imprison at least a third too many people in this country. All the evidence suggests that, as a supply-led industry, building new prisons to deal with over-crowding, in the long-run, simply increases the overall prison population.

UNFIT FOR PURPOSE

Yes, we need to build new prisons, because the current stock are mostly not fit for purpose, but, if we do so simply to increase capacity, we'll just continue chasing our tail, with an ever-increasing number of prisoners.

However, when I asked the Lord Chancellor, in an intervention in the chamber, what she was going to do to explore alternatives to prison for the sad and wretched, not the cruel and dangerous, I was met with what appeared to be incomprehension. Shabana Mahmood simply vowed to build more prisons, for the protection of the public, seemingly ignorant of what Lord Timpson has said previously on the subject, despite me quoting him in my intervention.

There is clearly a tension in the Ministry of Justice and our role in opposition must be to help promote the progressive voices within that team. The danger, of course, is that we fall into the trap of looking soft on crime; a particularly dangerous charge given a summer of thuggery and riots in which the correct decision to fast-track the trial and imprisonment of those who committed or incited violence can so easily be manipulated to support a 'prison works' thesis.

The reality is that prison can work, but too often doesn't, because it is applied too indiscriminately. Unfortunately, UK governments, over the years, have

"We are nothing if we are not progressive and there is no point winning for the sake of winning, if we become Tory-lite in the process"

been all too eager to lock more people up for longer, when all the evidence suggests that is often counter-productive. We consequently need to work with progressive voices within the current government to break that model, not by being soft on crime but by putting the victim at the heart of the criminal justice system in a holistic approach which recognises that a successful criminal justice system protects, punishes and promotes positive change.

In the wake of my intervention, I wrote to the Lord Chancellor asking whether the government was

proposing to look at alternatives to prison, including curfews and house arrest, while putting more emphasis on the needs of the victim by expanding access to restorative justice. I am pleased to say I received a positive response from Lord Timpson, to whom she passed my letter, who has suggested meeting to discuss further and clearly wants to engage in a dialogue to help move the dial forward.

In short progressives within government need our support. In proving we are the true opposition we must eschew the cheap shot, nor try to outflank them on the left, but work with those in Labour fighting its authoritarian tendencies.

The challenges will be many, as with Keir Starmer's profoundly illiberal plan to regulate outside smoking, based on utilitarian arguments as applicable to drinking, eating and horse-riding, or his decision to take advantage of our Brexit 'freedoms' to tax private schools.

But if we pick our fights wisely, we can prosecute a progressive agenda while still pursuing a strategy to take more seats off the Tories in 2029 and move one stage closer to establishing a liberal government in which we tackle poverty, ignorance and conformity by creating a society in which liberty, equality and community are paramount.

Paul Kohler is the Liberal Democrat MP for Wimbledon

SOCK IT TO ME

Sorting out a constituent's socks shouldn't be an MP's work, but the deluge of emails to a new one shows a better induction is needed, says Marie Goldman

Predictions are a mug's game in politics, but I'm going to break my own rule about not making any and make one right now. The most common phrase you'll probably hear me say over the course of the next few years will be: "There's surely a better way to run a country."

OK. Now that I've got that off my chest, let me backtrack a bit and explain where I'm coming from and, before that, please let me say that it truly is the honour and privilege of my life to be elected as the MP for Chelmsford, to be not only its first non-Conservative MP for 74 years, but the first liberal one in 100 years.

I mean, I'm not saying that Chelmsfordians are averse to change, but it seems they do like to weigh up their options carefully! I'm very grateful that they have done so and placed their faith in me and the Liberal Democrats. I will be working very hard to make sure they feel that trust was well placed.

So when I spend quite a lot of this article complaining about things, please understand that I do it in the context of being frustrated by a system that surely nobody would design this way.

IMPENETRABLE SYSTEM

The so-called 'mother of all parliaments' seems to have morphed into a system that is almost impenetrable to those on the outside. And it certainly isn't efficient, nor is it particularly transparent. And that matters.

It matters because as MPs, we must never forget why we are here: to represent our constituents; to raise their concerns; to fight their corner; to right the injustices and, ultimately, to change the laws to make a better, kinder, fairer society with opportunities for all and where everyone can lead the life they want to lead. (I caveat this, of course, by remembering that's a very liberal approach which isn't always shared by members of all parties.)

But if the public struggle to understand how our system works then how can they know their rights? How can they understand the best way to get help when they need it? How can they feel able to get involved in politics themselves, to stand for election, and to be a strong voice for their communities?

And how can we as politicians rebuild the trust that has been so eroded over recent years when the system seems stacked against that happening?

Please let me give an example to explain.

As we all know, the timing of this year's general election was largely a surprise to the country. The supposedly smart money was on an autumn election, but it turns out that Rishi Sunak's frequent reference to an election in the "second half" of the year, while literally true, was not quite in the spirit of transparency that we should expect from politicians.

Yes, we were prepared for it anyway and yes, the result didn't exactly go his way, but the consequences for the public are more complicated and profound than many political observers might guess.

Many, many MPs won their seats from a different party, as happened in Chelmsford.

As the declarations were announced something else happened to every new MP I know. It happened very quietly and without any fanfare from the media, but it was (and still is) profound. Our inboxes became deluged.

I'd say it started with a trickle, but that would be a lie. It was almost instantaneous. It started out with many very kind and generous words of congratulations from individuals – friends, family, colleagues, campaign volunteers, long-lost acquaintances. And they arrived in their hundreds, pouring through every mailbox available. If I'm being brutally honest, they were simultaneously lovely to receive and overwhelming. I wanted to reply to say a personalised thank you to each one, but the sheer volume made that impossible.

Then they were followed by emailed letters of introduction from lobby groups, national companies, campaign organisations, charities, special interest groups – all ostensibly saying congratulations, but many attaching long documents about their cause, hoping for a meeting and asking MPs to pledge their support.

And then came the casework. Now don't get me wrong – this is the key reason why MPs are elected, to help their constituents. As a district and county councillor for the past few years, I've become very used to receiving direct communications from local residents.

I'm happy to receive it and very happy to try to help. But what each constituent who contacts their newly elected MP can't see is the incredible volume of emails that their MP is receiving from other constituents, plus the organisations I have already mentioned.

It's hundreds of emails a day. Several thousand since 4 July. And it's impossible to keep on top of them while also learning how on earth Parliament works, where you're supposed to be and when, being in the chamber, attending training sessions, getting systems set up, filling in your Register of Interests (turns out I made a mistake in mine which inadvertently led to my first feature in Private Eye!), going to the various events that, for reasons I struggle to understand, are held in the first few weeks after the election, meeting with journalists, and a million and one other things that you're supposed to be doing while also being – quite frankly – utterly exhausted after a gruelling campaign that is surely the longest job interview out there.

And what the public have no way of understanding is

that you're doing all of this without any staff. Because that's the way our system works.

When a new MP gets elected, if they are from the same party as the outgoing MP, the chances are that they will simply inherit the same office and staff and the transition will be pretty seamless. There will already be maybe two or three people who can have instant access to the MP's inbox and can straight away weed out the unimportant stuff, deal with the myriad invitations (politely declining the vast majority), and crucially get to work on the casework.

EXPLODING INBOXES

For a new MP from a different party, the experience is wildly different. Our inboxes explode and when we get the chance to be in front of our computers, it's almost all we can do to categorise the emails we receive and respond to the extremely urgent ones, such as emails from constituents under imminent threat of homelessness.

I will admit that deluge of emails was far, far greater than I had ever expected and I realised quite early on that the only way to ensure I could cope in the medium to long-term was to focus my efforts on recruiting staff. So that's what I've been doing, and I'm incredibly lucky to have found some excellent people who are already having a positive impact on getting my constituency office up and running and wading through the backlog.

But of course, the public don't understand any of this. And why should they? We don't teach this kind of stuff in schools. I've never heard any of the political talking heads discussing it. And a lot of our TV is filled with news from the United States where their system is far from perfect, but at least there's some kind of handover and transition phase. I think we could learn a lot from that.

Because for the first few months after the election, many newly elected MPs will be struggling to keep on top of their casework. And yes, that's a pretty miserable experience for them, especially when they are contacted several times by the same constituent castigating them for not replying.

But it's an even worse experience for our constituents.

There are genuine issues that need to be addressed. People stuck in cramped and inappropriate housing. Children with special educational needs and disabilities not getting the support they need. Immigration visas lost in the system. Issues with GP appointments and school places not being granted.

Surely it would be a much better experience for everyone if there were some sort of transition period, allowing the incoming MP time to recruit staff, set up their office and get some training before needing to deal with all of these issues. Wouldn't that be better for our constituents?

The election result doesn't also come with some secret special pill that suddenly confers upon a new MP the ability to understand all the rules and

“If the public struggle to understand how our system works then how can they know their rights?”

regulations around visas, benefits claims, or pensions. MPs are usually elected because of their passion and commitment to the issues they campaigned on. They often have an ability to understand complex issues quickly. But it doesn't mean they have superpowers. It might be better if our system acknowledged that and made allowances for it that would benefit everyone instead of leaving constituents in limbo.

But of course, not all the casework that MPs receive is necessarily urgent, nor is it always something that an MP should be focusing on.

My favourite illustration of this came from a constituent who emailed me approximately a week after the election. He had bought a triple pack of socks from a local sports retailer and when he got home, he discovered that one sock was missing. He wasn't happy with the response he got from the retailer when he took the socks back, so was emailing me to ask me to complain.

Now, I'm not saying good customer service isn't important, but there is always the option for consumers to vote with their feet (even if they aren't fully clad in socks). I'm not sure it's the best use of an MP's time to be contacting businesses about every bit of perceived poor service a constituent receives. And while the MP is reading that email, they aren't reading the one from the constituent whose ill-health now leaves them stranded in a first-floor flat, unable to make it down the stairs.

But of course, any issue, no matter how small, is important to the constituent if they feel they need to contact their MP about it. All I'm asking for is a system that gives newly elected MPs the breathing space and capacity to be able to respond in a reasonable timescale. That isn't what's happening right now. It's too late for me and my colleagues in the class of 2024, but surely it's something we can fix for the future.

To that end, I'm pleased to see that a Modernisation Committee is being set up in this Parliament to look at ways that Parliament can be made more efficient and effective. I sincerely hope this issue is part of the reforms that are eventually adopted, because at the moment, there's surely a better way to run a country.

Marie Goldman is the Liberal Democrat MP for Chelmsford

HOW TO INSPIRE THE NEW DAWNS

Calum Miller borrowed Dawn's vote in July. Now he wants the Lib Dems to give the 'Dawns' positive reasons to support the party

"I can't vote Conservative this time but I'll never vote Labour," said Dawn, repeating a phrase I was to hear often during the general election. It was a welcome invitation to explain why the Lib Dems were the answer to her dilemma. Dawn and thousands like her gave us their support.

I have no doubt that it was these voters, switching away from the Tories to the Lib Dems who propelled us to a near 5,000 majority in the new seat of Bicester and Woodstock in Oxfordshire. So far, so Blue Wall.

As a new MP, I am grateful to everyone who gave me their vote in an election that has transformed our fortunes as a party. I also know that, for many, their vote was lent and that I and we have no right to expect it next time.

It's going to take three things for us to hold the gains made in July – and to go further and grow our parliamentary representation next time.

Local focus and dedication. We will be local campaigners and dogged advocates for our constituents. Hopefully, our reputation as good constituency MPs who care and act will grow, reinforcing the hard work of our local councillors.

A great campaign strategy. For the general election just gone, Ed and our senior campaign and comms team got it spot on. We all know that the next one will be fought on different ground; we need, when we get there, to be ready. And, so we can do that, we are going to need to double down on our fundraising and volunteer mobilisation so we have the resources to enact an ambitious strategy.

A compelling and distinctive narrative. Here is where it gets interesting. Our focus on care and carers really cut through this time, as did Ed's personification of a party that cares about individuals and takes politics seriously but is not above laughing at itself. With a larger platform – and more MPs to use it – we can use this parliament to set out our stall.

MIRED IN INCOMPETENCE

We need to continue to set out what we stand for and what makes us different from the other parties. The distinction from a Tory party mired in incompetence and misconduct was clear in 2024. Both Labour and we ran on change tickets that worked. In most cases, we did not run against each other. Hence the efficiency of our vote.

We can now expect that the Tories will initially career further to the right. Either they will have a performative populist leader or a marginally more moderate candidate who has made a pact with the membership to win election. Whether that leader will

see out the Parliament is unclear, but it is hard to see the conditions for the party to move back to the centre even if their first leader is deposed.

Come the next election, Labour will have had a term of grappling with the financial and public services legacy left to them. Building on our cut-through campaign on social care and NHS funding, to grow further, we will need in the next election to take the contest to Labour. Their leadership's instinct to show they are tough on the public finances will give us opportunities to show we are less doctrinaire, as winter fuel payments demonstrate. Our challenge is to be a constructive opposition not just by opposing the unpopular on a case-by-case basis but by articulating a compelling alternative approach to meeting the big national challenges that we know we face.

This is a huge task and one that might daunt some parties. Fortunately, as Liberal Democrats, we have a well-stocked library of policies! The task is now to give them renewed shape and coherence in the face of the emerging political context of the new parliament. Rather than focussing on the policies themselves, I want to suggest principles that could give coherence to our approach and help voters understand what we stand for.

Fairness was our watchword for this manifesto. It is a good, liberal one. We should expand and build upon it: continue to generate examples that show what we mean, and what a Liberal Democrat government would mean.

It is also a good tactical choice faced by two parties who have populist instincts. The Tories are not interested in fairness. They have identified a narrow core support and they will continue to play to it. If that is unfair on those outside their gang, they do not care.

At the same time, Labour are not applying principles of fairness to their approach. Their stated test is instead "is this good for the hard-working families of Britain?". But this masks a clear majoritarian instinct which does not prioritise fairness either.

If you have a serious mental health condition and regular fitness to work assessments make you too poorly to take on extra hours, you will not get any respite under Labour. If you have come to this country seeking asylum and want to put your professional skills to work while awaiting a delayed decision on your case, Labour are not interested. If a planning inspector has ruled against mega-projects, Labour ministers will still impose them.

These examples fly in the face of what I – and I suspect many of you – hear each week on the doorstep. British people have a strong sense of fairness. It is not

fair to victimise those who are unwell. It is not fair to discriminate against those who have already faced great challenges. It is not fair to ignore due process. In short, while the Tories and Labour may think a majoritarian strategy wins votes, voters see through it and do support core principles that protect minorities and due process.

We can already see this will be a government that displays the weaknesses of previous Labour administrations. Here are three pathologies to watch for:

- ☛ Public services are broken. We need to make change happen, fast. The only way we can do this is by centralising control to put better structures in place.
- ☛ Outcomes are not as we would wish them. Persuading people to change will take too long. We will introduce new laws to compel them to act differently.
- ☛ Big vested economic interests are too big to be tackled. We need their support and cannot afford to challenge them. We will introduce modest reforms that leave the fundamentals in place.

In short, Labour will be centralising, directive and conservative: as we can already see on planning reform, smoking bans and the reform of water companies.

What would a compelling Lib Dem response look like? It would be local, liberal and reforming.

I suggest we seek to organise our approach around four propositions, rooted in our liberalism.

CONTROLLING TENDENCY

Trust people to make good decisions about their lives. This would be the counterpoint to Labour's controlling tendency. Educate and empower are strong liberal principles. We should enable people to take back control across a whole range of issues, defaulting to trust in their common sense over trust in the state to regulate their actions.

At the same time, we should rebuild the state to serve citizens. We should organise government around citizens' lives not the machinery of bureaucracy. This reform is long overdue. Why should those who want to access public services bend themselves to the convenience of the responsible department or agency not the other way round?

Many reports and initiatives have argued for better coordination across government on complex problems like rough sleeping or child poverty. Yet nearly all have sought to resolve this top-down. What if, instead, it was forced to be bottom-up by starting with the citizen?

Put local communities first. We should make a binding commitment to do things locally by default. If we want to restore pride in local communities and in local government, it needs to be more than a vassal of the national state. If we applied the principle "nothing about us without us" to local communities this would

"Building on our cut-through campaign on social care and NHS funding, to grow further, we will need in the next election to take the contest to Labour"

turn the logic of the British state on its head.

Reform and reinforce institutions. The Johnson-Truss-Sunak era has seen the deliberate and calculated erosion of institutions. It suited their short-term purposes to attack institutions that might limit their actions. Often these institutions had

evolved over time to protect the interests of minority groups.

Without them, the populist government sought to be freer to pursue discriminatory policies. So many of our institutions require reform. But our instinct should be to drive that reform with energy and purpose while upholding the principle that institutions are frameworks within which competing interests can be fairly reconciled.

Re-set the relationship between the state and markets. Most people recognise that the unfettered market was allowed to drive too deeply into public services and public utilities. The water companies are the most pungent example. To recalibrate from a culture of quick returns and low investment to one that values patient, longer-term partnerships will take time. Yet it is desperately needed.

At the same time, government should be bolder in defining its fiscal approach: making the case to the increasing number of companies who bemoan a culture of short-termism that we must, together, invest for the future.

This government has already indicated it will stick to the spending plans of its predecessor and, with a few adjustments, to its fiscal rules too. We know that Tories' choices crucified growth and drove up the cost of borrowing.

Yet Labour's fixation on rigid rules will stop good investments from being made. From climate change adaptation to children's mental health, a miserly approach will immiserate future generations.

Instead, the fiscal rules should allow for preventative investment, with clear accountability of the savings this will generate and how future budgets will reflect these. What is more, government should be more ambitious in partnering with those companies and individuals who want to shape longer-term outcomes and are prepared to invest to do so.

These four principles are a starting point. They are rooted in our liberalism. None are new. I am sure friends and colleagues across the party will be quick to tell me how each is already reflected in our policies. In a way, that's the point! Let's focus on how we can project our policies to make a compelling case for deeper change.

Before the next election, I want to stand on Dawn's doorstep again and hear her tell me that she leant us her vote once but now we have earned it. And I want to inspire millions of new Dawns across the country to vote Lib Dem not only because they have hard-working, dedicated councillors and MPs but they believe our values and our policies are right for them, for their community and for our country.

FACE UP TO LABOUR

There's a moral case to fight Labour in its urban heartlands, says Rachel Bentley

Two months on from the 2024 general election, we still bask in our remarkable 72-seat victory.

Almost overnight, however, murmurs began: where do we go from here? Our party, accustomed to second places, now has just 27. Of these, only six are Labour-facing, including my own in Bermondsey & Old Southwark. Across inner London, the Greens are in second place in a significant number of constituencies, achieved through a markedly different, less intensive campaign style. This presents both a challenge and an opportunity for Labour-facing Liberal Democrats to reassert our voice in the party's identity and mission because while we revel in defeating Conservative giants, there is a moral case for fighting Labour.

Labour, particularly in many cities, are rightly criticised for taking certain voters for granted. This complacency was evident in the recent election, where minimal campaigning occurred in many urban seats. The resulting low turnout reflected not just voter apathy but also the strategic targeting of competitive seats by all parties.

As Liberal Democrats, we must challenge this complacency and ensure the voices of neglected voters are heard. This is not just a political strategy, but a defence of the democratic principle that all people deserve proper representation.

Stark urban inequalities will be exacerbated by Starmer's policies. Already, the maintenance of the two-child benefit cap and the removal of fuel allowances lay this bare. Here in London, too many people live in dreadful housing conditions in communities rife with crime and antisocial behaviour, which fuels in part the mental health crisis. Yes, previous national governments have starved local authorities of funding, but too many Labour-run councils and London's Labour mayor have woefully underserved millions through divisive politics and poorly executed policies. Labour are running out of excuses.

This neglect has created space for three forces to emerge. Firstly, the Greens, who promise a different kind of politics and won millions of votes with clear stances on climate action, the EU, and Gaza. They were bold where we were (wrongly) seen as muted. Secondly, Reform whose populism fuels dangerous social division shown viscerally in the summer's race riots. But the third and biggest threat is apathy. The failure to fight for votes sent (again wrongly) a message that we didn't care, and accordingly some didn't care to vote.

This growing disillusionment with democracy stems from a perceived lack of genuine choice between major parties, concerns about corruption and the failure of governments to tackle pressing issues. For many, the political system just doesn't deliver, leading to disengagement. One of the most pressing challenges for the Liberal Democrats in Labour-facing areas is to appeal to younger voters. This demographic

represents the future and is often the most affected by political decisions and faces unprecedented challenges: skyrocketing housing costs, precarious employment, loss of opportunities from Brexit and environmental catastrophe. Many feel their concerns are not acknowledged by the political establishment and who can blame them?

We can offer a fresh, compelling vision that speaks directly to these voters. Unlike Labour, often focused on class concerns, we can position ourselves as the party of forward-thinking, solutions-oriented policies that have broader appeal. On housing, we can advocate a mass housebuilding programme, including a more ambitious affordable housing target than Labour, while addressing exploitative practices faced by leaseholders and renters alike. On climate, we have pushed for more aggressive action to reduce carbon emissions and promote sustainable urban development. And we are proud internationalists, not just on Europe but beyond.

It would be a mistake to concentrate on the paper tiger that is the rump of the Conservative party. If we truly believe that no one should be enslaved by ignorance, poverty, and conformity, then we must turn attention to the government. Liberal Democrats oppose the concentration of power in anyone's hands. In many cities we are dangerously close to a Labour one-party state at all levels. We know that scrutiny, plurality and devolution create better outcomes. We must be a voice for those taken for granted by this winner-takes-all political system.

To win in Labour-facing urban areas, we need to campaign differently. We must use digital tools more effectively and adopt clearer branding like the Greens. We must push our most progressive policies on the economy, civil liberties and the environment. And in London, ceding some local party power to the region could help manage the challenges presented by significant voter and activist transience better.

Finally, we must acknowledge that our party is woefully white and middle-class, and I say that as a white, middle-class woman. We just don't reflect much of urban Britain. The longer we sideline our campaigning in urban centres, the longer this will persist. Standing up for people in cities is not just the right thing to do; if effective, it will diversify our support base and make us more credible as a political force.

By challenging the concentration of power and re-engaging those disillusioned with democracy, the Liberal Democrats can offer a compelling alternative. In doing so, we will not only broaden our relevance but also contribute to the revitalisation of democracy where it is most needed. This is the moral case for fighting Labour.

Rachel Bentley is deputy leader of the Liberal Democrat opposition group on Southwark Council and fought the 2024 general election in Bermondsey & Old Southwark

CULTURE SHOCK

Westminster's adversarial culture can drive good people out of politics. Sarah Green looks to the large crop of new MPs to change that

One of the most common questions I am asked, especially by younger constituents, is how we might get more people engaged in politics or, more precisely, what are the barriers to more people engaging in our democratic process.

I could list a host of reasons why so many don't even consider getting involved, not helped by social media threads that descend into vile abuse or Machiavellian depictions of politicians on screen (think Alan B'Stard or House of Cards). But I am certain that the perceived culture in Westminster is a major turn-off for many. And for understandable reasons.

What some call the cut and thrust of politics can to others look like an unedifying spectacle. Too often in the last parliament I sat in the House of Commons embarrassed by what was being broadcast to the world.

Robust debate is a fine thing but some of what we witnessed was anything but fine (and not remotely resembling debate). No newspaper, social media account or television production is responsible for the behaviour of politicians in the chamber - that's on us.

That behaviour doesn't end when the proceedings in the chamber stop broadcasting. The workings behind the scenes are just as important. And that culture isn't what it could or should be either.

Two years ago the former Speaker of the House, John Bercow, was reprimanded for being 'a serial bully' after an independent panel concluded there was "a marked abuse of power and authority" on his part.

There are sadly too many other examples to mention. It is what the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme (ICGS) was set up to address, and proudly declares that "it is the first of its kind in any Parliament in the world and is an important step forward in tackling inappropriate behaviour in our workplace".

In my 20 years as a member of the Liberal Democrats I have been a campaigner, a local party chair, sat on federal committees and stood as a by-election candidate before sitting as a Liberal Democrat MP. In those two decades I've seen too many excellent people (from different political parties) walk away due to bullying, harassment, intimidation or abuse. All of it was facilitated by our political culture.

Moreover, the culture within each political party contributes to the culture at Westminster. An MP standing for one of the Deputy Speaker vacancies a few weeks ago asked my views on the welfare of MPs

and their families. They remarked on the number of divorces and family breakdowns in their own cohort, and wanted to find ways to support the 2024 intake to avoid such outcomes in future.

Our current party managers are learning to navigate how to manage the largest cohort of Liberal Democrat MPs we've ever known. Others like the Green Party and Reform are figuring out how to manage a group of any size for the first time.

But it remains the case that welfare has often been seen as the domain of the party whips, which is problematic when they are also responsible for party discipline.

Maybe it is naive to think that a culture that has taken hold over many generations can be undone. However, more than half of the MPs elected in this year's general election (335) are new to the House of Commons. If ever there was an opportunity to move the dial on the unacceptable in Westminster perhaps it starts with a fresh crop of members.

On my first day back after the general election, I mentioned to a member of House staff how young the new intake felt. He shared his own private relief that as he was helping a departing member, who lost their seat at the election move their belongings: "I felt the negativity leaving the building with them".

I do not think the culture in Westminster is about to drastically change and improve overnight. I do

however have hope that with such a critical mass of new members, there will be enough voices willing to challenge the unacceptable and ask why on earth we allow some things to persist.

"If ever there was an opportunity to move the dial on the unacceptable in Westminster perhaps it starts with a fresh crop of members"

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

RACE AGAINST TIME

Six years after a report told the party how to campaign among ethnic minority communities little has happened. The Lib Dems will pay the price at the ballot box, warns Janice Turner

The shocking racist riots that took place over the summer, when mosques and asylum seeker accommodation were attacked, shows that the violent right-wing extremism many of us took to the streets to oppose in the 1970s and 1980s has not gone away.

It regroups and then strikes again whenever it thinks the time is right. It is thanks to the actions of the police, the courts and the thousands of brave anti-racists who came out to defend our communities and vastly outnumber the racist thugs, that further mayhem was prevented.

So the need to bring about real equality, representation and integration in workplaces, public services and political parties is as important now as it ever has been. And yet in the Liberal Democrats, ethnic minority representation seems no better now than it has been over the past 10 years.

OUT OF PATIENCE

This is why the Liberal Democrat Campaign for Race Equality is holding a fringe meeting on the Sunday night of conference. The campaign has run out of patience with a party leadership that has been told time and again – including by federal conference – to take action to improve ethnic representation in the party but still has not done so.

There have been inquiries and reports into ethnic minority under-representation for over 20 years, and it's six years since Lord Alderdice produced a report about race in the Liberal Democrats at the request of the party leader and the then Federal Executive.

Alderdice's main point was that race had to be top priority. He stated: "In the Liberal Democrats the commitment to diversity and the campaigns to make diversity happen have brought significant changes and improvements for women and LGBT+ members and representation, but not for BAME members and representation, and I became convinced that if things were really going to change this now had to be a 'Number 1' priority issue for the party.

"The party has a tendency to try to be inclusive of all issues at all times and that has an intellectual appeal, but it has not worked for BAME communities, because addressing everything means focussing on nothing." But this did not happen.

His narrative report recommended setting up the race diversity committee similar to the Campaign for Gender Balance; having a vice-President for BAME communities; and taking action to improve the party's complaints system. These were carried out. But he also urged the party to have a national social media campaign to get across to the membership that there is a problem within the party, and to focus on local parties, helping them to engage with and involve BAME communities and welcome the change they can

help to bring in the party.

The Racial Diversity Campaign was so underfunded that one of its reports to federal conference stated that the people running it had had to pay for the RDC website out of their own pockets.

LDCRE has done all it can to push the party into fulfilling Alderdice. It welcomed the report and set out its own detailed proposals for how it could be carried out.

After that was ignored, when the Thornhill review into the 2019 general election called for evidence, LDCRE put forward a substantial submission and recommendations which the Thornhill Review accepted and included in the resulting report.

But when the federal board put forward its own response to Thornhill in a motion to the 2021 federal conference, it ignored the Thornhill recommendations that Alderdice be implemented in full.

LDCRE was incensed at this and put forward a successful amendment which was passed at conference. But the party leadership has still not fulfilled the outstanding recommendations of Alderdice.

In order to demonstrate the extent of the party's continued failure to do this, this year on behalf of

Liberal Democrat Campaign for Race Equality (LDCRE)
in association with Social Liberal Forum and Liberator

Putting Race Back on the Agenda

Six years after the Alderdice Review told the party what it had to do to become more racially diverse, and four years after the Thornhill Review insisted that the party fulfil Alderdice, the Lib Dems still do not reflect our society.

LDCRE commissioned a "where are we now" review by eminent journalist and race equality professional Janice Turner, to be launched at this meeting.

Speakers: Baroness Floella Benjamin, Baroness Meral Ece, Christine Jardine MP and Janice Turner

*Sunday 15 September, 19.45–21.00
The Brighton Centre, Meeting Room 1D*

Jointly sponsored by **liberator**



LDCRE I carried out an audit of the party's response to Alderdice since 2018. The report will be launched at the fringe meeting on the Sunday evening of conference.

The report demonstrates how the party seems unwilling or unable to take the action Alderdice told them to do – to make race top priority. Instead it has done what he specifically counselled against. The party hired a consultant to conduct an equity, equality, diversity and inclusion

(EEDI) audit which put forward recommendations that led to an EEDI strategy 2021-25. No doubt there's no party member who wouldn't welcome the Liberal Democrats putting together an EEDI strategy. But it should have been done hand in hand with implementing Alderdice. It wasn't.

But why should anyone be bothered about this? After all, we've just won more Parliamentary seats than ever.

First, in order for the party to speak for and represent all communities, it needs to have its roots in all communities and have proper ethnic minority representation at every level of the party.

Fighting for race equality is in the party's DNA, and it has a proud record of anti-racist action going back at least half a century. The preamble to our constitution makes clear where we stand. Our policies passed at federal conference over the years show that our party understands the issues. The actions of our party around the country, in Parliament and in campaigns over many years demonstrate this. But it has yet to show sufficient diversity within its own ranks.

Second, after years of Conservative ministers stirring up 'culture wars' and using inflammatory rhetoric, at this year's general election five Reform Party candidates were elected to Parliament and came second in 98 seats. The Liberal Democrats must do all we can, nationally and locally, to counter this threat.

But third, the party continues to ignore the electoral implications for us of ignoring the ethnic minority vote. For many years multiple surveys of ethnic minority voting and voting intentions have concluded that around two-thirds to three quarters vote Labour and a declining number voting Lib Dem.

The Ipsos-Mori analysis of the 2019 general election stated that 64% of ethnic minority voters voted Labour, 20% voted Conservative and 12% voted Lib Dem.

The 2021 census showed that reaching out to ethnic minority communities is now even more important. It revealed that across England and Wales 18.3% of the population is now ethnic minority (ie groups other than white).

The ethnic minority population of London is now 46.2% for example; in Manchester it is 43.2% and it is now a majority in Birmingham: 51.4%.

In this context the 2024 general election result was not quite as outstanding a success for the party in

“The party continues to ignore the electoral implications for us of ignoring the ethnic minority vote”

terms of race diversity. The new House of Commons had its highest ever proportion of ethnic minority MPs at 14%. According to British Future they comprised 66 Labour, 15 Conservative and just five Lib Dems, or 16% of Labour MPs, 12% of Conservatives and 7% Lib Dem.

There are few grounds for optimism in terms of second place seats: the Lib Dems came second in 27 seats of which reportedly three had ethnic minority candidates. Reform finished second in 98 seats, 89 to Labour. The

Green Party is now second in 40 seats, 29 to Labour. Of the Lib Dems' 27 second place seats, six are second to Labour.

In the election Labour lost about half a million votes in areas with the highest Muslim populations; other than Islington North and Bristol Central, all the seats Labour lost were seats in which over a quarter of the population was Muslim.

But the lack of sufficient engagement with ethnic minority communities, particularly at a time when many who felt betrayed by Labour policies on Gaza would have welcomed Lib Dem policy, resulted in the votes moving away from Labour mostly transferring to other parties.

BEHIND THE GREENS

An Ipsos poll for the Independent, published in July, revealed that Labour lost almost a third of its vote share from ethnic minority communities since the previous general election, dropping from 64% to 46%. The Conservative vote dropped by 3%, but the Lib Dems went down 4% while the Greens and the Independents' support increased by 9% and 13%. According to Focaldata's How Britain Voted, the ethnic minority electorate placed the Liberal Democrats fourth behind the Greens.

For several years the Green Party has recognised the need to engage with ethnic minority communities and this has been a significant factor in their substantial progress, increasingly being seen by the ethnic minority electorate as the alternative to Labour. That the 2024 general election resulted in the Green Party gaining more votes than the Lib Dems from the ethnic minority electorate should be a cause for great concern for our future electoral progress.

But this failure to implement Alderdice raises another question: if federal conference sets out clear requirements of the party's leadership (including its federal committees), is it just fine for that leadership to ignore them?

LDCRE believes the party leadership's failure to implement Alderdice is damaging our prospects of future progress, as well as undermining our party's claims to be able to speak for and represent all communities. LDCRE says it's time Alderdice was implemented in full.

Janice Turner is the author of LDCRE's report
Putting Race Back on the Agenda

CAN HARRIS DO IT?

Kamala Harris's late entry into the US presidential race has spared her several dangerous moments and united a fractious party like never before, says Martha Elliott

"For me, picking Kamala Harris was the first decision I made before I became our nominee, and it was the best decision I made my whole career," proclaimed President Biden in his speech to the Democratic National Convention.

In early 2024, I would have said the worst decision he ever made was running for a second term.

Now I'm not so sure. I wanted him to drop out after the Israeli war began and his refusal to take a stand against prime minister Netanyahu caused protests all over the US, especially college campuses.

But he didn't, and his ratings continued to plummet. His fragility became apparent in the debate with Trump, and Democratic leaders began telling him privately that he couldn't win or publicly withdrawing support for his candidacy.

PREPOSTEROUS REPLY

Although he seemed stronger, his interview with George Stephanopoulos didn't reassure most Democrats or Independents that he was up for the job. I thought his proclamation that it would take God Almighty to come down and tell him not to run as a preposterous reply to Stephanopoulos. But God works in many mysterious ways, and when the money being donated to his campaign dried up and Democratic leaders who he said would never tell him to withdraw told him he couldn't win, perhaps he saw it as a sign from God—or at least a political message, personally delivered to him from the very leaders whom he said would never tell him to withdraw.

When Biden dropped out, it took him a few days to announce his endorsement for Vice-President Kamala Harris to be the nominee. Perhaps he thought the fairest political process would be to let the convention decide the nominee, and I admit I thought that at first. But within 48 hours, she had raised more than \$100m and had the pledges of enough state delegations to be the nominee.

Former Speaker Nancy Pelosi did not endorse her publicly until after Biden had endorsed her but I can't think of any politician who could have pulled off such a seamless succession but Pelosi herself. I have no proof that she convinced Biden to withdraw - although at the convention, she was the belle of the ball, being interviewed about it on just about every network and major newspaper.

The New York Times reported August 30 that the majority of Democrats in the Senate, especially Chuck Schumer, had a major role in convincing Biden to withdraw to preserve his legacy and to not bring down vulnerable senators with him. But I suspect Pelosi and her staff were working the phones behind the scenes as soon as Biden withdrew - even before he endorsed Harris and gave his Oval Office Speech.

I've watched political conventions since I was too young to be watching them. I can't remember one that was more unified, exciting, and well-produced than this year's was. I am convinced that the fear of God - actually, of Trump, the anti-Christ - was instilled in all the delegations. Someone said, "Okay, you got what you wanted. Biden dropped out, so now unite." And they did. Who could have done that but Pelosi, the ultimate politician? I don't remember any convention being so energised and united as this one. There was no visible animosity. They even took back many of the themes that Republicans had tried to claim as their own such as patriotism, religious belief, support of the military or family values. It was the best produced convention ever and that had to be done in the month between Biden's announcement and the convention. They not only got Republicans to endorse Harris and slam their own party, but also added subtle jibes at Trump like Harris' grandnieces to teach the convention delegates how to correctly pronounce her name. One of my favourite moments was when Oprah Winfrey not only spoke, but in her signature style asked for "Joy." Compare that to the doom and gloom of Trump's Republican convention. The Democrats - and I am one - were exhilarating.

So now I have to wonder: was Biden's late withdrawal from the race what has given Harris and the Democratic party the best chance to defeat Donald Trump and save democracy? Historians will debate that beyond the 22nd century.

Ultimately, I believe much of the answer will be determined in the results of the election. If Harris wins, many might conclude that the delay helped her and the party defeat Trump because there was no other choice for a candidate at that late date. The primaries were over. It would have been down to a convention brawl. That would have only helped Trump. Instead, we saw the most unified Democratic party that I have ever seen.

Many people reading this might be too young to remember the convention of 1968 that took place just after President Lyndon Johnson had withdrawn and Senator Robert F. Kennedy, Sr, the most likely candidate to gain the nomination, had been assassinated in June. The Yuppies were battling the police in Chicago because of the Vietnam War. They didn't want Vice President Hubert Humphrey to be nominated, but he was. The result was that Republican Richard Nixon was elected. And the war went on for seven more years. The 2024 convention was the opposite.

So, maybe delaying his withdrawal was the best decision that Biden ever made. A whole season of primaries with debates and the inevitable name-calling that goes on would have divided the party. Even Pelosi

couldn't have healed those wounds enough to bring unity to the convention. It also threw a wrench in Trump's plan of attacking Biden as a sleepy old man. Now the sleep, cognitively-impaired old man running is Trump. Just try to follow one of his rambling, two-hour rants and you'll know why he should be afraid to debate Harris.

The convention is over, and Harris continues to rise in the polls, but the important question is what will it take to get her elected? Her first decision before the convention was brilliant - picking Governor Tim Walz of Minnesota as vice-president nominee.

ATTACK DOG

He was brought up in a small town in Nebraska, a former high school teacher and football coach, a former US Representative and the perfect attack dog - something you need in a VP because it allows the candidate to stay presidential - who deemed Trump and his VP, JD Vance, "weirdos". He speaks to the common man. He is unfiltered in a good way, one that speaks to people from similar backgrounds, one that is not rude or calls names, but one who speaks from his heart. 'Coach Walz' will, if you'll excuse the football reference, make touchdowns while allowing Harris to call the plays.

Having only three months to run for the presidency gave her the advantage of not having to prepare detailed policy statements before the election - although she will be prodded many times to give specifics. She didn't have to bring up race or her gender in her acceptance speech. The picture of her grandniece, with similar pigtailed to those of Harris as a child, watching her accept the nomination said all of that implicitly. She began with her origin story: her mother coming from India to study but rather than going back for an arranged marriage, met her father, fell in love, and married a Jamaican immigrant.

After parents split up, her scientist mother rented an apartment in the working-class neighbourhood of Oakland, California, and relied on friends to help raise Kamala and her younger sister Maya. Her mother instilled in her the value of faith and community and the importance of following the golden rule of treating others as you want to be treated. She taught her daughters "never to complain about injustice, but to do something about it." And She told them to "never do anything half-assed."

She explained that at a pivotal moment in her life her best friend, Wanda, confided in her that she didn't want to go home because her stepfather was sexually abusing her. So Kamala took Wanda home and it was at then that Harris decided not only to become a lawyer but to be a prosecutor who could defend people like Wanda because everyone has "a right to safety, to dignity, and to justice." This meant, as Harris repeatedly reminded the crowded auditorium that she would have only one client her entire career, the

"A whole season of primaries with debates and the inevitable name-calling that goes on would have divided the party"

people. "Kamala Harris for the people."

"I stood up for veterans and students who were being scammed by big, for-profit colleges. For workers who were being cheated out of wages...for seniors facing elder abuse. I fought against the cartels who traffic in guns and drugs and human beings. Who threaten the security of our border and the safety of our communities...But we never gave up because the future is always worth fighting for.

And that's the fight we are in right now—a fight for America's future," she declared.

She said that is the fight we face now - because though Trump "is not a serious man"...but the consequences of putting Donald Trump back in the White House are extremely serious." She cited how Trump tried to overturn the election, got a mob to storm the capital and has been convicted of fraud. She talked about his attempts to cut social security and Medicare and how his Supreme Court picks helped overturn Roe v. Wade, and a woman's right to choose. She cited the roadmap of the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025 that would take us back to the past, but promised "we are not going back."

Harris cited a "new way forward" that would help to strengthen and grow America's middle class. "And as president, I will bring together labor and workers and small-business owners and entrepreneurs and American companies to create jobs, to grow our economy and to lower the cost of everyday needs like healthcare and housing and groceries."

I'm sure that Trump and other Republicans will say that Harris's speech did not outline specific policies or how she would accomplish her vision of the future, but she has not had time to create specific programmes.

She continued that same approach when she sat down at a diner in Georgia for her first one-on-one interview with CNN's Dana Bash. She praised Biden's accomplishments and promised to continue his legacy. She refused to take the bait when Bash asked her about Trump's racial attacks or when asked about Biden's health. And I believe that the promise of her vision for the country compared with Trump's vision of a wasteland will help her get elected. She has, to quote Oprah, "joy!" And I believe the American public is sick of Trump's spiteful rants. He has no specific policies to outline, only vitriolic rants.

I chose joy and forward thinking over Trump, and I think the American people will, too.

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

PUBLIC BAD OR PUBLIC GOOD?

The Tories thought growth came only from private firms. Does Labour think the same, asks William Tranby

There was a long-established general belief by Tories that the private sector was the answer to most economic issues.

Shrinking the state was a long-held mantra for them. This ‘public bad, private good’, was the bedrock of economic policies of successive prime ministers, however reasonable or unhinged, from Thatcher onwards. Only Ted Heath once scolded the private sector with his comment that profiteering was the unacceptable face of capitalism.

This routinely unchallenged belief in the private sector has scarred British politics for decades now and appears to still influence the new Labour Government’s thinking. The pursuit of growth is the number one priority with the Government seeing its role as bending over backwards to help the private sector expand its investments in the belief the extra economic activity generated will drive up tax revenue to pay for public services.

UNMITIGATED DIASTER

Well that might well work. But the economy is more than just the activity of private sector companies. We already know that privatising a monopoly provider of services designed to protect public health and wellbeing, the supply of clean drinking water and the safe disposal of sewage, has been an unmitigated disaster. Getting that untangled will take a decade at least.

But I question the mindset that the economy only grows when the private sector grows through investments.

Public sector institutions are as much part of the economy as companies of all sizes, not-for-profit institutions, and charities.

GDP measures economic activity. When a school buys computers for its pupils it is buying them from the private sector; when a hospital buys a CT scanner or engages agency staff it is buying from the private sector. When a new prison or courthouse is built it will be a private sector contractor that gets the construction job. All these transactions, whoever is the purchaser, and whoever the supplier, count towards the GDP figure.

The link between the purchasing power of public institutions and the private sector is obvious, but apparently not to the Tories. I worry whether their same deranged attitude is infecting the Labour party now.

Workers in public institutions spend their wages and salaries on goods in shops or buy a range of services from high-street and online providers. The more money they have in their pockets the more goods and services they buy.

The companies that supply them welcome increased sales because that means more profits, and an incentive to invest in their systems and equipment to make more money in the future.

CHEQUES FOR BILLIONS

Even Donald Trump realised that to stimulate the economy you need to give more money to poor people so that they can spend more. After the pandemic the US government churned out billions in cheques directly to the poorest Americans to get the economy moving again.

So yes, Labour should settle public sector wage demands at recommended pay review levels.

Yes, they should listen to the reasonable Liberal Democrat demand that care workers should have a higher minimum wage to help fill the thousands of vacancies in the care sector, not just to increase the number of workers available, but to increase the demand in the economy for goods and services.

Yes, removing the two child benefit cap would also be a £3bn stimulus to demand in the economy.

Labour does not have to wait for the impact of higher investments in the public and private economy to drive up tax revenue, they can equalise capital gains tax and income tax rates and look again at wealth taxes.

We are a tragically unequal society and we should start now to improve the social fabric of our country. We do not need to wait for private sector investment to impact on our economy and tax revenues. Measures to tackle inequality and improve the incomes of the poorest will also drive up GDP.

William Tranby is a member of the Liberator Collective

ACTION CALL AS BANKS VANISH

Financial exclusion is getting worse and needs an answer, says Claire Tyler

In Liberator 423 I pointed out that more than five million people in the UK rely on cash in their day-to-day lives. I argued that with local bank branches disappearing from entire towns, those who depend on cash and physical banking services delivered face to face need the Government to ensure the newly emerging 'banking hubs' have regulated services. I have regularly been making such calls in Parliament for the last couple of years.

However, access to cash is just one critical area that needs protection to ensure everyone is financially included. For millions, a lack of access to essential financial services is exacerbating the cost of living crisis, forcing them to pay a 'poverty premium' through higher utility bills, higher insurance costs and high-cost, risky credit.

As a commissioner with the Financial Inclusion Commission (FIC), an independent body made up of experts from financial services, businesses, the charity sector and academia, these are issues I want to fix. Our latest report, Fixing Financial Exclusion across the Four Nations, highlights the vital role of financial inclusion in reducing poverty, tackling the cost of living crisis, building household resilience, and fostering inclusive economic growth.

As face-to-face banking services rapidly decline, particularly in rural areas, many vulnerable groups - such as the elderly and those with physical or mental disabilities - are left without access to basic banking services.

According to the Financial Conduct Authority, half of those aged over 75 used a bank branch in 2021-22, yet the closure of more than 6,000 bank branches in the last decade has left many communities struggling.

FIC's research emphasises the urgent need for regulated banking hubs to provide essential services like cash withdrawals, face-to-face support, and financial guidance in areas abandoned by traditional banks. These hubs could be a lifeline for those who depend on physical banking services.

The causes of financial exclusion are multifaceted, stemming from industry practices, policy gaps, regulatory weaknesses, and insufficient cross-sector coordination. That's why I'm so pleased the Liberal Democrats made a specific manifesto commitment to introduce a national financial inclusion strategy.

This would require both the Financial Conduct Authority and the Prudential Regulation Authority to have regard to financial inclusion, including protecting access to cash, supporting banking hubs, expanding access to bank accounts, delivering Sharia-compliant student finance, and supporting vulnerable consumers. Unlike the Labour and Conservative manifestos, the Liberal Democrats' commitment places financial inclusion front and centre, recognising its importance to a fair and prosperous society.

To learn more about the importance of financial inclusion, explore FIC's findings and recommendations in our report, Fixing Financial Exclusion across the Four Nations online, [https://financialinclusioncommission.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/FIC_Fixing_Financial_Exclusion_2024.pdf] or pick up a copy from Liberator, stall H8 at the Brighton conference.

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

The case for prioritising a National Financial Inclusion Strategy

Millions of people in the UK face financial exclusion. Without access to essential financial services, they are unable to secure their wellbeing and participate fully in our economy.

Learn more with research commissioned by the **Financial Inclusion Commission** (FIC), conducted by the University of Birmingham's Centre on Household Assets and Savings Management (CHASM).

Ask Commissioner **Baroness Claire Tyler of Enfield** for more information.

Collect your copy of FIC's report:
**Fixing Financial Exclusion across the
Four Nations**

Location: Liberator Stall, H8, First Floor

Find online [here](#):



40 YEARS ON

The Liberal Revue delivered 14 full performances and a 'crucifixion' from its 1984 start until 2008. Mark Smulian looks back at when satire took centre stage

It's now 40 years since the Liberal Revue first trod the boards at the Liberal Assembly, and since the brevity of conference nowadays makes it unlikely any such show could be performed again, let's have a look back.

In the early 1980s, the Conservative and Labour conferences had, respectively, the Blue and Red revues.

There being no Liberal equivalent the idea of providing one arose among a loose group of people who gathered regularly at the old National Liberal Club bar, known as 'The Table'.

The late Simon Tittley decided to stage a Liberal Revue and recruited from among his immediate circle of Liberal friends a team of actors, writers, musicians and technicians.

Scripts ideas were assessed on a system of: A - it goes in the show; B - it needs further work; C - rejected. Later a T category was added - 'we will need a Transit van with a running engine by the stage door if we dare to perform this'. The latter though did not stop the 'crucifixion' of David Alton in 1992.

Fortunately the Assembly Committee - predecessor of the Liberal Democrat Federal Conference Committee - was sympathetic and a venue found in at the Wessex Hotel at the 1984 assembly in Bournemouth.

The show was called the Lymeswold Declaration - a parody of the Limehouse Declaration with which the SDP had been founded - and named after a newly-launched brand of soft cheese.

Performers had no idea what to expect but the audience reaction was sufficiently enthusiastic that it established the revue as an assembly fixture. It also established Mark Tavener's Climb Every Staircase song as the finale of every show.

The revue arguably moved from satirical entertainment to something stronger with the Liberal SDP merger, which was strongly opposed by most



performers who were also horrified by the botch David Steel made.

A few hours after the vote to merge in January 1988 those members of the team not too distressed to perform took the stage of the Blackpool Tower Ballroom, where a social for the special assembly was held.

Hurriedly adapted scripts gave both barrels to the merger and Steel. The cast thought they'd be booed off stage but were warmly received. Perhaps the revue voiced what a great many 'yes, but' Liberals secretly felt towards the merged party.

While the early revues had made fun of the Liberal party they had done so with affection.

The revue altered stance as the disastrous first phase of the Social and Liberal Democrats unfolded, with horrors such as dropping Liberal from the name to become 'the Democrats', and falling to fourth place in the European elections.

Affectionate mockery changed to vicious satire of those merger supporters who had arrogated to themselves the language of 'seriousness' and 'competence' but who had instead delivered fiascos.

The 1988 show featured the





Liberalfinder General, seeking out liberals to be burnt at the stake, while in the 1989 show the cast took the corpse of 'The Democrats' and gave it a good kicking. After that, we retired.

Ironically it was Paddy Ashdown who helped resurrect the revue. He told us in 1991 he felt the revue was important to the party's sense of itself and its ability to accommodate it was a sign of political health.

It was too late for that year but the idea was planted and in 1992 the revue returned at Harrogate, followed by shows in 1993, 1994 and 1996, and as the party settled down the content grew more like that of the earliest revues.

Titley then moved to Brussels and there was no obvious replacement director with both his attention to detail or authority to direct sometimes temperamental performers.

Some of the team performed sketches at the Glee Club over the next few years until the revue's second coming in 2002, when Titley was temporarily back in the UK.

Things had changed. In its heyday the assembly was a week long up to 1,000 people attended the revue while hardly anyone ran a fringe meeting against it as they risked a sparse attendance.

By 2002 the conference was shorter but with more meetings, training sessions and receptions crammed in.

The 2002-04 revues played to audiences of only some 500, which came dangerously near

break-even.

There was no appetite to perform in 2006 and 2007 which were marked by the sad early deaths of team members Harriet Smith and Mark Tavener but a one-off show was performed in Bournemouth in 2008.

This had its moments but Titley put his foot down when talk turned to a silver jubilee show the following year. He felt it was not up to the standard of the revue's heyday and with family, professional and political commitments making it harder to get people to rehearse reliably he would not direct another.

Its for others to judge whether the Liberal Revue was funny and whether it had any political influence. Most of all it was fun.

A collection of Liberal Revue DVDs, scripts and programmes is lodged in the National Liberal Club library. Filmed shows can be found by searching for 'Liberal Revue' on YouTube.

Mark Smulian is a member of the Liberator Collective and was a member of the Liberal Revue team



REINTERPRETING RAWLS

The American Liberal philosopher John Rawls may be little known but his ideas remain important. Simon Banks looks at a new book that seeks to put Rawls in a modern context

In 1971, an American academic, John Rawls, published a book which revolutionised political philosophy, at least outside those countries where political philosophy was entirely provided by the government.

In academia, his book *A Theory of Justice* remains hugely influential. But its impact on the politics of decision-making, of election campaigns and governments, was and is minimal. Indeed, in the 50+ years since it came out, actual politics in the democracies has gone sharply in the opposite direction to what Rawls proposed. Why?

Rawls' university studies were postponed by the Second World War, in which he served with distinction as a common soldier. Losing his previously strong Christian faith, he went searching for a logical framework which could underpin a just society, something that to him was only too obviously absent.

He self-identified as a Liberal. He was, naturally, an American Liberal, which sometimes seems in European terms to best translate as 'social democrat'. That may help to explain why he's even less known among political activists in the UK than in the US.

MILL AND LOCKE

People who have heard of JS Mill and Locke have not heard of Rawls. That, the British economist and philosopher Daniel Chandler, in his book *Free and Equal*, sets out to correct, also working through Rawls' very general ideas about measures into specific proposals.

In philosophical terms, Rawls aimed to challenge utilitarianism (whatever makes the most people happiest is good) and intuitionism (we can sense what is right) as well as philosophy's then preoccupation with linguistic analysis and contempt for actual ideas about what to do.

He started with his most famous idea, the "veil of ignorance". What if people were robbed of all knowledge of whether they would be rich or poor, highly or little educated, abled or disabled, male or female, even of what religion or philosophy they might follow, and were then asked to decide if their society should respect certain basic liberties (a familiar list for a Liberal) or not, and be as equal as possible, or highly unequal?

He assumes 'rational men' (sic) would choose the former in both cases. So he proposes those basic liberties as bedrock for a fair society. He goes on to point out that just removing any overt discrimination still leaves people with deeply unequal life chances because of family circumstances and so on, so he advocates "fair equality of opportunity" in which, as far as possible, people have an equal start in life and an equal chance of progressing. But we can't entirely

eliminate differences coming from supportive or unsupportive parents, let alone differences in ability that come from genes or biological chance.

So he proposes 'the difference principle': inequalities are only justified if they benefit the poorest people. For example, to pay surgeons or senior managers or the Governor of the Bank of England highly may help recruit the most capable people to these positions and that will benefit everyone including those at the bottom of the pile. Only a few can receive the training and experience needed to be a brain surgeon, but if everyone received only 10% of that training, people would die.

Finally, he proposes the 'just savings principle': every generation has a duty to maintain the resources upon which future generations will depend.

Rawls adjusted his initial statements over many years in response to comment, but basically they've proved proof to picking apart. So why have they had so little impact outside academia while the rich have grown richer, the poor have grown poorer, public services have declined and the left has become afraid to talk about inequality?

It may be that any attempt to establish a common logical framework for politics is doomed. There's no lack of people who for fairly obvious reasons, are bound to reject Rawls. That includes all those among the haves who want to preserve inequality; all those who for reasons of hatred and fear cannot accept the basic liberties for all; and those who consider him irrelevant because he works within, rather than against, a capitalist system. But that leaves numerous people he has hardly influenced.

For a start, the core idea of people agreeing to a fair and free society "under the veil of ignorance" seems artificial, "airy-fairy" to many. It's Rawls' version of the myth of the 'state of nature' and people gathering under a tree to agree a form of government, described with useful vagueness as "a thought experiment".

But it's hard even to imagine people robbed of family and culture, even of their beliefs, as people. There is also no evidence that people actually would behave as Rawls thinks, reasonable though his supposition seems: they might prefer to gamble. I suppose it could be tested in a gaming context, but then gamers want to compete and take risks.

There is a situation in which people do generally behave like this and it's quite surprising Rawls, with his military experience, doesn't seem to have quoted it. A small group of people thrown into a dangerous situation – survivors of a plane crash or shipwreck in an unfamiliar, possibly hostile environment; mountaineers, whether from one organised group or not, aiming to get back to safety after a sudden worsening of the weather; or soldiers separated from their unit, officer-less and behind enemy lines, do

tend to co-operate towards their common goal on the basis of equality, with any inequality justified by its value to all – for example, to take particular care to keep safe a medic or the only person familiar with the environment.

Something similar was meant by the Puritan preacher Winthrop when he exhorted newly-arrived settlers in New England to “extraordinary liberality”: they must co-operate on an equal basis and not just look after number one, or they would all die. But these are exceptional circumstances and small groups.

That American Liberalism has diverged so far from European (even British) Liberalism is another reason. That Rawls’ seminal book was long and not an easy read certainly has played its part – plus Rawls’ self-discipline in staying out of discussing political measures, judging others to be better-qualified to do that. These difficulties, Chandler’s recent book is aimed to overcome, and does the job well.

But there is another reason that also goes a long way to explain why the current of practical politics since 1971 has been powerfully towards more inequality, a weaker state and now, more hatred and exclusion, all trends contrary to Rawls.

The ‘progressive’ parties, seeing their traditional urban working-class base was in decline, abandoned it, either taking it for granted like Labour, or ceasing to compete for it, like the Liberal Democrats after 2010. That handed a huge opportunity to the populist Right and the themes that would help the intolerant Right – immigration, Islam, the weird causes espoused by the ‘chatterati’ – were enthusiastically pushed by commercial interests who wanted low tax and unblunted capitalism.

Just add a real issue about migration caused by vast disparities between rich and poor regions of the world, by failed states and global warming, and Rawlsian Liberalism was heading rapidly downhill.

The migration issue points to a key weakness in Rawlsian ideas. It’s one pointed out by Rawls’ former pupil and collaborator, Amartya Sen, but ignored by Chandler in rebutting other criticisms from Sen. The ‘society’ whose freedom and fairness Rawls seeks seems generally to be assumed to be a nation state. Consequently, while pupils of Rawls are strongly pushed towards policies to reduce inequality within one state, there is virtually no guidance about international inequality.

To be fair, Rawls’ description of a community as a group of people co-operating does allow for circles of community from the wide and weak to the small and strong, but he does not pursue the thought. There is only the ‘just savings principle’, by which one might argue that perpetuating extreme inequalities worldwide is storing up trouble for the future; but the rich have the weapons and the walls.

While Rawls places emphasis on his basic freedoms, which are pretty much what most Liberals might list, his starting point – what is a fair society and how can it be justified – reflects his own instinctive beliefs and can, for some Liberals, distort. The question is about a fair society rather than a free, creative or empowered society. Practically, the difference is small because in a grossly unequal society, such as the UK, Brazil, India or even more, the USA, inequality brings unfreedom, disempowerment and a loss of creativity; but the warning should not be forgotten. For example,

when Chandler considers the inequality resulting from private, fee-paying schools, he advocates not only the removal of tax concessions, but all-out abolition. Makes sense for reducing inequality, but apart from the awkward argument about the rich woman or man who spends on their children’s education rather than on another yacht or golf course, there is a serious point about creativity and diversity.

FEAR OF ODDNESS

Any state education system is constrained by consensus views and a fear of oddness. Private schools can experiment and do things state schools might get sat on for doing. Consider not only Quaker schools, but even traditional public schools. Are creativity and diversity not enhanced by their challenge?

There is one other weakness which some might consider a strength. Rawls was moved by a deep sense of fairness and unfairness. When he could no longer ground this in Christianity, he sought philosophy.

That brought a great faith in rationality. Again and again, he posits that a ‘rational man’ will of course think like this, do that. A rational man will respect certain basic freedoms; will, if he can’t be assured of personal advantage from inequality, desire equality.

But will he? Rawls set out to supersede both the moral emptiness of utilitarianism and the hit-and-miss of intuitionism. But his basic assumptions are in fact intuitions: he’s just managed to pare down the number of intuitions required. For me, that isn’t a big problem, but the repeated appeal to rationality lacks any emotional force behind its morality. In the 19th century, numerous Liberal rank and file, as Eugenio Biagini shows, many of them religious Nonconformists, engaged passionately with domestic reform and foreign liberation. As late as the 1970s, working class solidarity could be mobilised in good causes or bad. An appeal to what is reasonable and logical cannot make armies march.

Chandler does a very good job of translating Rawls’ theories into well-argued programmes of action, most of them far too leftish to be favoured by either Labour or the Lib Dems at present, but nearly all in line with basic Liberalism of empowering people (especially those most disempowered); but the problem is still the hearts rather than the minds.

Rawls talks sense. Chandler talks sense. But how does that become a mass movement?

Simon Banks is a former Liberal parliamentary candidate and councillor and is chair of the Lib Dem Eastern region’s development and member engagement committee and a member of the Social Liberal Forum’s Council.

Free and Equal: What would a fair society look like. By Daniel Chandler. Penguin Politics

Good Chaps by Simon Kuper Profile Books

The British euphemism for corruption is sleaze, which has the benefit of not attracting legal action when bandied about. The Financial Times journalist, Simon Kuper, argues that the UK's ruling elite turned to self-enrichment when the last generation to fight in World War Two exited the political system, taking their sense of public service with them. Up until then, Kuper writes, rules weren't thought necessary because most good chaps generally knew the boundaries of ethical behaviour.

Then came Mrs. Thatcher's buccaneer capitalism, and Brexit's rule-breaking contempt for deep state internationalists and their institutions. Money poured into British politics, and the ruling class justified its self-dealing because their friends were coining it in the City, hedge funds and property development, making MPs feel relatively poor. Thanks to Boris, the pirate king, greed and sleaze were normalised, leading to public cynicism about all politicians and institutions.

Kuper's list of scandals (Tory and Labour) is familiar to those who follow the news closely. However, he paints a devastating portrait of a nation circling the drain.



REVIEWS

Covid-VIP lanes; golden visas for friends of the Kremlin, dodgy Chinese and Gulf Arabs; cash for honours; Crispin Odey, Bernie Ecclestone, Ben Elliot, and Richard Desmond's return on investment in Robert Jenrick; the timid Electoral Commission, and Lord John Nash's 47,000 invoices, to mention a few milestones on the road to Nigeria. Most recently, the Tories refused to return Frank Hester's donations, and their senior treasurer was in the torturing kleptomaniac Hosni Mubarak's cabinet.

Kuper reckons Labour's generous individual donors (Sainsbury, Lubner, Vince) are motivated by morals. His concern is with the gold rush of corporates and consultants who offered Starmer pre-election "help" in the form of policy advisors (See Peter Geoghegan at Open Democracy). Morgan McSweeney's failure to report vast sums donated to Labour Together resulted in a tiny fine. Will Labour tighten the rules? Why would they?

Rebecca Tinsley

became attorney general in 1919.

Hewart left the Commons 1922 on being appointed lord chief justice, having already turned down the chance of becoming home secretary. No doubt this offer was a tribute to his talents, but it may also have been a sign of the limited number of people who were loyal to Lloyd George even at that early in his premiership.

Neil Hickman's book is concerned to defend Hewart's performance as lord chief justice – he has gone down in history with a poor reputation – and to press the relevance of his thought today.

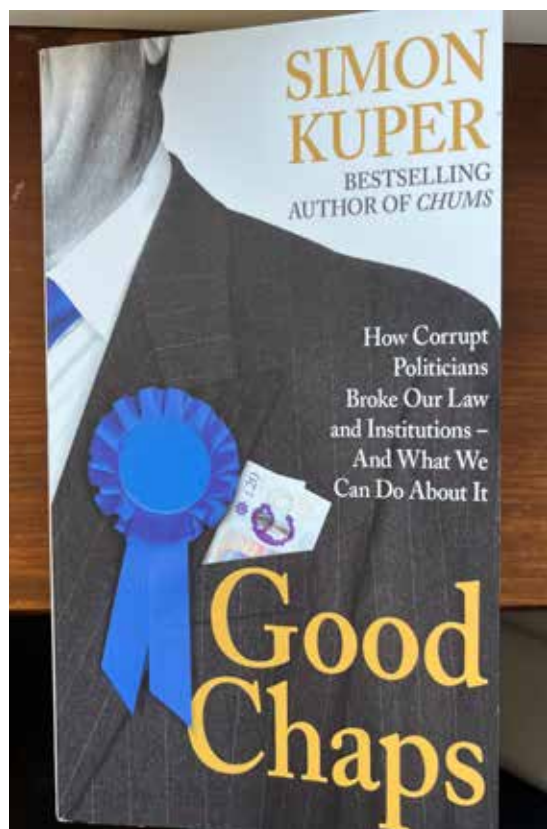
His most important writing is to be found in *The New Despotism* from 1929, and the route by which he fears despotism arising has much in common with the practice or ambitions of recent Conservative governments: pass only skeleton legislation, fill in the details with orders parliament cannot vote on and bar legal challenges to the new laws. Hickman argues that the danger to democracy from such processes is graver than it was when Hewart was writing.

Hewart may be best remembered today for his maxim that "Justice must not only be done, it must be seen to be done" – though he never arrived at such a concise formulation of it himself. This belief was of a piece with his distrust with the 'Good Chap' theory of government; this holds that officials need not be bound with burdensome rules if we can trust them to do the right thing because they are the right sort of people.

Those with a passing knowledge of the law may recognise two cases that crop up in Hewart's career. One is the libel case brought against a newspaper publisher by one Artemus Jones – Hewart came to prominence as a barrister by winning it for him. The second is his decision in the Court of Appeal to support the quashing of a guilty verdict against the Liverpool insurance collector William Wallace for the murder of his wife because

Despotism Renewed? Lord Hewart Unburied by Neil Hickman £24.95 from Amazon UK

Gordan Hewart is a figure from those Dark Ages of the Liberal Party between the end of the First World War and the revival under Jo Grimond. Born in Bury in 1870, Hewart came to prominence as a radical journalist in the north west before becoming a barrister. He was elected for the two-member seat of Leicester in a 1913 by-election and, with the help of the Coupon from the Lloyd George coalition, won the new single-member Leicester East seat in 1918. He had served as solicitor general from 1916 and



it was unreasonable given the evidence the jury had before it. This case has become a favourite with true crime enthusiasts, and the consensus among them seems to be that Wallace did it. I am sure Hewart was not swayed by the fact that Wallace had once been the Liberal agent in Harrogate.

All in all, this is a welcome introduction to the life of a forgotten Liberal. Though written with his legal career most in mind, it says much that is relevant to the politics of Hewart's era and of the present day.

Jonathan Calder

The New Progressivism - A Grassroots Alternative to the Populism of Our Times by David Amiel and Ismaël Emelien Polity 2020

Emmanuel Macron was a largely unknown French apparatchik and then junior finance minister under Socialist President, François Hollande. He suddenly resigned in August 2016 in order to form a new party, En Marche, with the aim of fighting the presidential election of 2017. At the time this seemed like a quixotic campaign against all the established parties by an almost unknown individual with no political base. There followed four totally unpredictable 'accidents' which undermined each of the main parties and delivered the presidential election into Macron's hands.

First, the main conservative party, Les Républicains, chose François Fillon as its candidate rather than the expected and more popular Alain Juppé, the mayor of Bordeaux. Second, and shortly afterwards, Fillon was charged with embezzlement and this largely destroyed his presidential campaign. (He was eventually, after appeal, sentenced to four years in prison, three of them suspended.)

Third, Hollande's approval ratings fell to a record low of 14% and this, coupled with a very colourful personal life involving three different partners, led to his resignation from his nomination for a second term.

Finally, Macron's Front National,

opponent, Marine Le Pen, was charged with misuse of public funds as a European MEP and forced to repay significant sums. Macron narrowly topped the poll in the first round with under 25% of the vote and was comfortably elected against Le Pen in the second round. The momentum from this electoral success carried the party through to a parliamentary majority in the National Assembly elections of 2017.

Thus France had a president from a party formed less than a year before with an essentially unknown political position. This book, first published in French in 2019, is an attempt to set out the political philosophy of Macron's En Marche party, now renamed Renaissance. From this book it is a centre-left, mildly progressive party, somewhat akin to the SDP in its early days. Thus its policies and its stances on issues are all acceptable but generate little enthusiasm. They include: the importance of education for employment opportunities; the stultifying effect of the two-party dominance; both Left and Right accept monopolies for their selfish reasons; education is not an end in itself but needs to develop ideas and purposes; the huge American tech firms are dangerous and stifle innovation; positive discrimination is not 'progressive'; the European Union has important roles, such as in migration, but its influence must be kept in check; the secular state is crucial to democracy; and that the party has caused the end of the Left-Right definition of politics. The authors claim that the summary of En Marche is that: "Progressivists must not create the policies of their majority but a majority from their policies."

Perhaps inevitably, given the party's lack of a more solid philosophical base, its electoral success has waned. Macron secured a second presidential term in 2022 but the party fell 27 seats short of an overall majority in the Assembly elections of June 2022. Following the relative success of the far-right Rassemblement Nationale (RN) at the 2024 European elections, Macron called early legislative elections. Eventually, through typically French inter-party haggling, the RN was kept in third place but the three main party groups each had significant

numbers and France has to find a compromise to enable a government to be formed.

Macron is constitutionally barred from standing for a third presidential term in 2027 and it remains to be seen whether 'Macronisme' without Macron can survive. This book is a pleasant read and is a brave attempt to put together the basis for an attractive manifesto but the beginning of the revival of the traditional parties suggests that the party has difficult task ahead.

Michael Meadowcroft

Africa And The Backlash Against International Courts by Peter Brett and Line Engbo Gissel Zed Books

Here is a refreshingly honest look at the ways in which the African elite manipulates gullible donor nations into paying for justice mechanisms that are either ignored or undermined in practice.

In the 1990s, there was global enthusiasm for supranational courts such as the International Criminal Court (ICC) to bring accountability following human rights atrocities. In theory, if individuals could not find justice through their own national court system, they could appeal to regional or international courts. However, this book shows that in practice, those in power in Africa tended to use the courts to secure their own legitimacy and to persecute their political opponents, often following a coup.

When it came to prosecuting the likes of Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, Sudan's Omar Bashir, and Gaddafi of Libya, elite solidarity guaranteed their immunity. African leaders offered excuses such as "prosecution would imperil the peace process or stability". The fact that in the case of Sudan there was no peace process was overlooked. Mugabe, on the other hand, played the liberation struggle hero card effectively; Gaddafi was untouchable because Libyan oil bankrolled projects across the continent including the Organisation of African Unity.

From 2008 onward, "the ICC and universal jurisdiction were

increasingly conflated as new weapons of choice of former colonial powers targeting weaker African nations.”

The fact that African nations had signed up to those courts and been given generous funding to prepare for working with them was forgotten. Once the ICC began indicting African tyrants, leaders asserted that at stake was nothing less than the need “to preserve and safeguard the dignity, sovereignty and integrity of the continent.”

The authors make the point that non-Africans fail to appreciate that the assertion of “sovereign equality” is the language of morality for the African elite, given decades of humiliation by colonialist nations. The desire to reject neo-imperialist legal interference would be more credible had African regimes treated their own regional courts with respect. However, whenever these regional judicial systems were tested, sovereign equality and elite immunity usually took priority over the human rights of long-suffering African citizens.

This has contributed to the widely held belief among African civil society groups and citizens that the African Union and other regional organisations are a worthless dictators’ club meeting in pleasant resorts and spending money on themselves rather than intervening to stop coups or the persecution of their subjects.

The book illustrates the numerous cases in which leaders have used regional courts to settle scores with their opponents. Otherwise, inconvenient judgements are simply ignored, much to the frustration of the admirable and brave civil society NGOs and bar associations across the continent.

The book describes the ways in which African regimes have used regional courts to prove their legitimacy following coups or dubious elections. “Legality rather than effectiveness has been characteristic of the African state in general.” Unfortunately, “legitimation through legality differs from the internalization of rule of law values.”

The authors ask, “If court authority threatens political power, why build it in the first place?” Put simply, the international community went through a phase of promoting justice, accountability and transparency on the continent.

In order to keep the donations flowing, African leaders went along with the whims of the funding bodies. “This strategy was aimed at major donors such as the EU, the US, the IMF and the World Bank.” Nothing much changes, it seems.

Rebecca Tinsley

A People Betrayed by Linda Melvern Zed Books

It is easy to despair of the United Nations while mass atrocities occur around the world. However, Linda Melvern’s authoritative study of the 1994 Rwandan genocide reminds us that it is the individual states on the UN Security Council that choose to prevent it from enforcing its own resolutions. In the case of Rwanda, diplomats representing the UK, US and France actively stopped its own peacekeeping force from taking effective action that might have prevented the slaughter before it began.

For months, General Romeo Dallaire, the UN peacekeeping force commander in Rwanda, warned UN HQ about arms caches, hate speech, discriminatory laws, militia training and lists of opponents being compiled.

The UK high commissioner in neighbouring Uganda reported to London on the increasing violence, as did aid agencies. Thirty years later, Bill Clinton continues to pretend his administration had not receive a stream of detailed intelligence about the military buildup in Kigali. For decades, the French denied that they trained the Hutu Power killers, armed them throughout the 100 days of slaughter, and protected them when they lost ground to the mainly Tutsi Rwandan Patriotic Army of Paul Kagame.

In the case of the Bisesero massacre, French troops enticed 1,000 Tutsi into hiding, promising to rescue them. The French then disappeared, allowing the Hutu Power genocidaires to “finish their work.” France continues to give refuge to 100 ideologues who masterminded the genocide and committed mass murder. The UK protects five genocidaires on the



Africa and the Backlash Against International Courts

Peter Brett and Line Engbo Gissel

grounds that they would not receive a fair trial in Rwanda. Yet, under universal jurisdiction, those five could be tried in the UK, if the British government chose. (Using this legal mechanism, Germany has recently convicted a member of Islamic State for the slaughter and enslavement of Yazidis in northern Iraq).

Melvern has just updated her magisterial study of the genocide. This book provides meticulously researched detail on the complicity of the international community in the death of an estimated 800,000 members of the Tutsi minority and Hutu moderates. Before the killing began, General Dallaire daily asked the UN to allow him to seize the massive Hutu Power arms caches. This was refused because in Somalia, in 1993, American soldiers died trying to seize illegal arms supplies (as featured in the film, *Black Hawk Down*).

Dallaire asked for reinforcements, believing an international show of force would deter the Hutu Power killers from continuing with their genocidal plans. The commander thought that just 5,500 troops could have achieved this aim. Diplomats from the US, UK and France denied Dallaire troops or resources, choosing inaction. It took weeks for them to even allow Rwanda to be discussed. America refused to jam the radio station broadcasting instructions to the Hutu militia on

the grounds that it would be against free speech.

There is no reason to believe the international community learned from its mistakes in Rwanda. The deliberate targeting and attempted elimination of ethnic and religious minorities continues in Sudan, Myanmar, Nigeria, China, the Democratic Republic of Congo, India and Pakistan, to name but a few places where the UN seems toothless. Yet, as Melvern makes clear, it is not for the want of UN resolutions.

The UK has learned nothing: the Foreign Office recently reversed itself by no longer calling the 2003-06 slaughter in Darfur a genocide. Lord David Alton has repeatedly proposed legislation allowing the UK to make an initial genocide determination by referring mass atrocity situations to the High Court. The Conservative government insisted that only an international court could make such a determination. Yet, in Catch-22 fashion, the UK would not refer any case to a competent international court, presumably for fear of offending trading partners. Let us hope the Labour Government takes a more enlightened view.

Rebecca Tinsley

Three False Convictions, Many Lessons: The Psychopathology of Unjust Prosecutions by David C Anderson and Nigel P Scott Waterside Press, £22.50

The possibility of false conviction is routinely deployed as an argument against the death penalty, but otherwise does not concern us as much as it should. Anderson and Scott look at three high-profile cases, those of Amanda Knox and Raffaele Sollecito (Italy), Stefan Kiszko (UK) and Darlie Routier (USA), and trace the factors they have in common.

The authors emphasise the roles of psychopathology, confirmation bias, false confessions, the media and the internet as causes of unjust accusations. Putting a lack of empathy among police officers, prosecutors and others to the fore, it considers a wide range of other psychopathological aspects of miscarriages of justice.

They write: "The law is too

important to be left to lawyers, judges, prosecutors and police if we are not ultimately to sink to the levels described by Franz Kafka in the trial where the victim Joseph K discovers at first hand just what can happen when lawyers decide that their role is to earn a living at the expense of the accused and where things cannot be questioned."

Darlie Routier is still on Death Row in Texas despite overwhelming evidence that her conviction for killing her own child is false, while Knox, Sollecito and Kiszko have been vindicated by the highest judicial authorities and telling evidence. The authors show how and why unfounded rumours still persist in the case of Knox and Sollecito and advances the theory that the Routier killings were the work of a notorious serial killer.

Jonathan Calder

And Then What? Inside Stories of 21st Century Diplomacy by Catherine Ashton Elliott and Thompson 2023

This is an excellent book of considerable interest to everyone involved in foreign affairs and in diplomacy. I need to record my two connections with the author, Cathy Ashton, otherwise the Rt Hon Baroness Ashton of Upholland, LG GCMG.

During my time as a Liberal MP I happily worked with Cathy Ashton and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and she approached me to stand for election to its council, mainly because she wanted to broaden its membership base and to diminish the hold that the 'tanky' Labour members had on the council. The election for fifteen members was on a multiple 'X' basis and I explained to Cathy that I would only be able to vote for myself and not even for her as, with a multiple 'first past the post' election, every other vote would count against me.

She asked what was needed to avoid this problem and I explained that it needed to use the single transferable vote which enabled CND members to rank candidates in order of preference. STV was adopted and I was duly elected. I hope CND thereafter retained STV for its elections.

My second involvement with Cathy was completely different. She asked if my Granny Lee Jazz Band would play at her wedding to Peter Kellner at St James's Church, Piccadilly, in 1988. I readily agreed and when we played a jazz version of the wedding march, she and Peter danced down the aisle!

When in late 2008 Catherine Ashton was proposed to be the first occupant of the post of what is, in effect, the foreign minister of the European Union (officially high representative of the union for foreign affairs and security policy) there were a number of negative comments about her capacity to deal with the high level diplomacy it required.

From my knowledge of her I had no such doubts. Following her five years in office there was almost universal approval of her skills and performance. This book recounts the rather curious process by which she was appointed but, more importantly, it is a vindication of her ability to represent the EU in the most delicate and difficult situations.

It provides detailed accounts of the EU diplomatic involvement in seven key crises: Somalia, Haiti, Egypt and the fall of Morsi, the collapse of Libya, Serbia and Kosovo, Iran nuclear negotiations and the revolution in Ukraine.

Ashton's memoir recounts her brief time as the UK's commissioner for trade and the curious process through which she was moved to foreign affairs. Despite being extremely detailed, Ashton's accounts of the EU's role in foreign conflicts and of her day to day negotiations with the key players are really well written and an easy and even racy read. The book is a valuable reference work for everyone interested in the EU's overseas role and for those wanting the details of the negotiations on the seven issues dealt with. After her term of office she became the first vice-president of the European Commission - a relative sinecure after the foreign affairs post.

Michael Meadowcroft

Monday

You find me seated in a deckchair, surveying my gardens and listening to the midsummer hum of insects (and to Meadowcroft grumbling as he works). Life is good: Freddie and Fiona are leaving me in peace (no more demands that I go canvassing in St Kilda) and Matron and the Well-Behaved Orphans have departed for their accustomed holiday at Trescothick Bay in Cornwall. There is only one fly in this fragrant ointment:

a colony of beavers has turned up and is making free with my demesne. Take this lake I am sitting beside: it was, until last Thursday, my croquet lawn. Why, they've even rigged themselves up a jacuzzi! Now, I'm all in favour of rewilding – this is, I believe, the only estate in England with a breeding population of corkindrills – but one does like to be asked. Yet when I went to have it out with the beavers, they insisted I speak only to their elected spokesman, and his answer to everything was to say he had “the backing of the entire lodge” and refuse to give an inch.

Tuesday

I have been touched by the number of people who have written to express their concern about my position if Starmer expels my hereditary peer peers from the House of Lords. Please do not upset yourselves: I hold a Rutland peerage, and thus under the Treaty of Oakham am guaranteed membership of the House of Lords in perpetuity. Sadly, the same treaty guarantees the pre-eminence in this county of the Duke of Rutland, even though he lives in Leicestershire. His home is at Belvoir Castle, which, by an irony I find in no way amusing, is pronounced ‘Beaver Castle’.

Wednesday

What to do about the beavers? Back in the Sixties I might have asked Violent Bonham Carter's boys to have a quiet word with them: “Nice dam you've got here. Pity if anything happened to it” – you know the sort of thing. But those days are gone, so I have instead been asking around to see who might be able to help. This morning I struck gold. It transpires that one of our new MPs from Cambridgeshire, Pippa Heylings, is expert at smoothing over the tensions that arise in communities when beavers are reintroduced, so I feel sure she will make them see reason. When I was picking the Revd Hughes's brains the other day, he mentioned that our Roman Catholic friends count beavers as fish in case they get peckish during Lent. It sounded Rather Far Fetched, but when I phoned my old friend Father Alton he confirmed that it is the case.

Thursday

The delightful Pippa arrives at the Hall and wastes no time in getting down to business. After listening to my concerns, she goes to talk to the beavers and is away simply hours. She comes back with the bones of an agreement, the long and short of which is that the beavers will agree to take on the maintenance of the Rutland Union Canal, but their lodge and lake will stay. Oh, and I can use their jacuzzi whenever I wish. Well, it's not ideal, but it's a good sight more than I achieved off my own bat, so I am minded to sign.

Lord Bonkers' Diary

Friday

Labour members, my scouts tell me, are not happy with the early weeks of their government. Tipping buckets of cold water over old age pensioners and sticking out their tongues at Belgians is not what they thought they were signing up for. Conservative members, by contrast, are as happy as a Trot-hound with two tails because they are now attacking their real enemy: each other. Informed sources suggest their current

leadership contest will come down to a fight between Robert Jenrick and Kemi Badenoch. Jenrick, I am told, is a useful fellow to sit next to if you want a planning application approved, while Badenoch has been described as putting the ‘bad’ into Badenoch. Come to think of it, she's put the ‘Enoch’ into Badenoch too.

Saturday

Feeling in need of a chinwag, I make my way to the royal chamber of the King of the Badgers, deep beneath the triumphal arch I had erected to mark the victory of Wallace Lawler in the Birmingham Ladywood by-election. I find him in low spirits. His strategy of fighting the cull of his people through the courts while reining in the hotheads among the younger badgers has come to nothing. He is now inclined to let the young idea, as it were, shoot. Soon we are talking of the beavers, and the King suggests their guild-like organisation comes from reading Hegel, whom we agree is fundamentally unsound and responsible for making T.H. Green's writing *Such Hard Work*. The King then tells me of a legend among the badgers that the Duke of Rutland's Belvoir Castle is so pronounced because it was originally built by beavers, who were later driven from their home by usurping aristocrats. I shall make good use of this story next time I find myself talking to my new friends with the webbed back feet and scaly tails: it has *The Ring Of Truth*.

Sunday

On my way home from Divine Service at St Asquith's, I called at the beavers' lodge. I casually broached the subject of my family's long feud with the Dukes of Rutland, emphasising what rotters they have been over the centuries. “Sounds like we'd all be better off without ‘em,” remarked the elected spokesbeaver. At this point I dropped the King of the Badgers' theory about Belvoir Castle originally being Beaver Castle into the conversation. Just as I had hoped, this gets him properly riled. “I'm calling a meeting and shall recommend immediate direct action,” he said, the light catching his sharp front teeth. He must have got the required two-thirds majority, because later in the afternoon I saw the entire colony marching north, armed and looking Terribly Fierce. So I write these words in their jacuzzi as the deer graze beyond my ha-ha. I don't know whether the beavers will succeed in retaking Belvoir Castle and drive out the Dukes of Rutland – though I did pass on to them a map showing secret ways into the cellars of the old pile that the King of the Badgers found in his library – but they will be out of my hair for a while. As for the lake... Well, it is rather pretty and I have never been that fond of croquet.

Lord Bonkers, who was Liberal MP for Rutland South West 1906-19, opened his diary to Jonathan Calder