

# liberator

## Review finds Davey stunts worked

Liberator **exclusively** reveals future ones



Rhinoceros riding



Lion taming



Flying trapeze



Octopus wrestling

- 🔥 Seize our chance from Trump and Starmer - Paul Hindley
- 🔥 Unsafe as houses - Martin Wrigley MP
- 🔥 Among the Taliban - Keith House & Tonya Craig

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## LIBERATOR

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# COMMENTARY

## COMMUNITY POLITICS THREATENED

For those with any experience of tangling with Labour the idea that it could produce a devolution package that increases centralisation will be unsurprising.

Labour's package involves handing over a vast range of powers to elected mayors and a reorganisation of English local government that will see unitary councils created serving around 500,000 residents each.

It has been little noted how many places have tried elected mayors and then - despite Labour's uncritical enthusiasm for them - got rid of these local dictators in subsequent referendums. Hartlepool, Torbay and Bristol are among examples.

As when the Blair government first imposed mayors, Labour's language is all about cutting through the compromises and debate required by democracy in favour of a "strong man" (and it usually is a man) who can "get things done" by ramming them through with no constraint on their power and councillors reduced to asking questions and making comments.

Aside from Bedford (until last year) and Watford, the Lib Dem record in mayoral and police and crime commissioner elections is non-existent.

Changing to such large scale elections of all-powerful individuals is not the only reason that Labour's proposals look like a threat to Lib Dem local government campaigns.

Labour also wants huge unitary councils created. These will be necessarily remote from local residents and the government also wants fewer local politicians.

So not only will there be elections over large areas for mayors, but local authority wards will become enormous and take equally enormous resources to fight.

Ever since the Liberal party adopted community politics in 1970, campaigning has been based on winning a ward and working outwards into others. That model works with wards of their current size - whether it could work with wards being the size of a substantial town is questionable.

Labour's plans also undermine another Lib Dem fixation. Their proposed councils are clearly based on historic counties - not on regions. Given Labour's majority its plans are likely to take effect in which case there would be zero public appetite for a further upheaval involving the creation of English regional assemblies, for which there was never much public support anyway.

These changes make more or less irrelevant Lib Dem policy for an English parliament indirectly elected by regional assemblies and pose a danger of making the traditional Lib Dem model of local campaigning ineffective when grappling with vast areas.

## THAT WENT WELL, BUT NEXT?

The Liberal Democrats 2024 general election review is a notably upbeat document (see page 4) and quite unlike its recent predecessors.

Many of its suggested changes are somewhat technical relating to the management of fundraising, communications and candidate selection, with the latter having been a notable problem although the review fails to explain exactly what difficulties arose or why.

A finding that voters are perfectly well able to work out for themselves who to support tactically should they wish to ought not to be a surprise, and nor should the statement that pre-election pacts are difficult to manage and counter-productive. Such pacts assume that parties can move blocs of voters around as though they were chess pieces. They can't, and Labour won't participate anyway. Let's hear no more about these.

Surveying the party's opponents, the review's attitude to the Tories might best be described as "steady as she goes". It acknowledges that at the next election the Tories are unlikely to be quite as unpopular as last year but says little new about how fighting them might be improved.

On Labour there is only a somewhat vague recommendation: "The Party must also develop a specific strategy and messaging [to ensure that we are in a better position to fight] for Labour-facing and urban/inner-city seats."

It's understandable little attention was paid to fighting Labour in 2019-24 but given the colossal number of seats Labour now holds this looks the prime source of future gains and some flesh must be put on the bones of this 'specific strategy'.

Reform is mentioned only in passing and the Greens not at all. Given the unstable record of its previous incarnations there is doubt that Reform will exist - at least in its present form - come the next election but the review does not note the rather obvious point that Reform's capture of ex-Tory voters must have helped some Lib Dem gains.

Reform's highest surges among disillusioned voters largely happened in places with little Lib Dem presence; it may not always be like that.

Search the entire review and one will find not a word about the Greens, yet fighting them is inextricably bound up with any 'specific strategy' for fighting Labour. The Greens displaced the Lib Dems into third place, or worse, in a lot of seats the latter might entertain the idea of fighting properly next time.

The review admits the party's lack of progress on candidate diversity, though not directly the mouldering recommendations of Lord Alderdice's review, which the Liberal Democrat Campaign for Race Equality has been complaining increasingly loudly about the long failure to implement.

# RADICAL BULLETIN

## WHAT LURKS BEHIND SUCCESS?

The 2024 general election review is understandably very different in tone and content from its predecessor's evisceration of the 2019 campaign (Liberator 401). The party was also quick to publish it, unlike the 2017 version, deemed so embarrassing to the party establishment that it was suppressed until leaked to Liberator (Liberator 389).

With an increase of 61 seats on the 2019 results Tim Farron - who led the review - strikes a notably cheery tone.

Farron, whatever his problems as leader, knows about winning elections and his recommendations are sensible and for the most part concern keeping doing what the party did in 2024 but doing it better and sustaining this over a parliament.

There are though three points that leap out, the most prominent being concern about candidate selections, which Farron has said he wants to bring to Harrogate spring conference.

Although his report does not nail what the problem was, it describes the candidate selection process for Westminster elections as "broken" with volunteers "left struggling on" to ensure a full slate is fielded.

Having congratulated those who stood, Farron says: "We do them a disservice by not addressing the fragmented nature of our structures which results in an unhelpful separation between candidates and campaigns and bizarrely elections more broadly."

He said would-be candidates were "often left in the dark about when selections are taking place" while local parties could be ordered to start a selection but with no returning officer available.

Farron called for a "single set of approval and selection processes for Westminster candidates and setting an overall selection timetable for all seats".

His second main stricture is about the continued failure on diversity. Farron does not directly address why Lord Alderdice's report on improving race diversity remains unimplemented (Liberator 426 and 425) but said although the parliamentary party is more diverse the party still did not meet its goals.

Women made up only 28% of the overall candidate list - though 44% of MPs - while some female, LGBT or ethnic minority candidates had suffered heightened online hate campaigns.

Farron's third concern is what the party does about Labour given the two parties are in contention in only a handful of seats.

Many review submissions "expressed frustration that there wasn't a clear Labour-facing message and that the campaign was focused broadly on Southern and less-urban seats", though the review does not get around to a solution beyond the observation "the party will want to have a message on Labour as the party of

Government come the next election and this will likely form a key strand of its narrative as the 'effective opposition'".

Farron's finding that pre-election pacts would be both pointless and counterproductive ought not to be contentious, but probably will be in some quarters.

The conclusion that Ed Davey's stunts were popular and effective rather leaves hanging what Davey - or a successor - will do next time. Davey can't repeat stunts the public have already seen and the party may not want to risk any leader in activities that are undignified, dangerous or both. Farron also describes Davey as a 'centrist dad'. So now that's official.

## ENGLISH LESSON

The unedifying election process for English Liberal Democrats (Liberator 426) staggered to an end with the recently ennobled Caroline Pidgeon becoming chair.

This position went uncontested with Lucas North - who had briefly occupied the post after the earlier resignation of Alison Rouse - not standing.

A final upset was added by the absence of returning officer Rahul Sinha at the count, although the results were eventually counted.

Pidgeon is a popular figure but has become an object of suspicion in some quarters by her attempts to change how the English party works.

Among proposals on which she has consulted are to have four rather than six meetings a year of the English Council Executive and only two English Council meetings.

She also wants to scrap the English Finance and Administration Committee, which meets eight times a year, and replace this with an officers group "that meets outside of ECE to ensure actions are carried out" though with its meetings "minuted and available to ECE members", a situation described as "a more streamlined structure".

This has led to claims that scrutiny will be unacceptably reduced and power concentrated in a handful of officers, and to accusations that under Rouse and North the English party had the impertinence to act independently of the party establishment and is being brought back under control.

## POWER OF PATRONAGE

To the surprise of nobody, party president Mark Pack has been made a peer, giving him a senior role even after this term ends later this year.

Suggestions that his title will be Lord Pack of three, cards or wolves are thought to be incorrect.

Pack has considerable technical expertise in politics but there is some concern in the Lords that he has risen while saying little on any subject of controversy.

The other new peer is the popular figure of Shafaq

Mohammed, who fought Sheffield Hallam at the general election and had been expected to again.

Whatever one's view of Pack or Mohammed, both were appointed by Ed Davey without the slightest pretence of democratic endorsement.

More than 20 years ago the party agreed to elect a peers list and while the choice of nominations would remain with the leader nominees would be drawn from this list, meaning the process was not entirely one of secret patronage.

This was used while Charles Kennedy was leader but fell into disuse under Ming Campbell and Nick Clegg - and the latter made a number of rather bizarre appointments of friends and donors.

Is it time to revise the peers list? This mattered little while there were no new peerages on offer, but there are now.

Could it be that Nick Clegg, freshly booted out of (sorry, resigned from) Meta will fancy a berth in the upper house, since as a former deputy prime minister he could probably claim that under the conventions. Whether the party needs the counsel of its least successful ex-leader is another matter.

## HERE COMES THE JUDGE

Jo Hayes' latest day in court in her case against the party over her expulsion saw a pretty dramatic defeat, with Mr Justice Dias ruling that each of seven grounds in two limbs of her appeal had "no real prospect of success".

This though related to various court rulings on the conduct of her case, not the substance of the case itself, and an intriguing new factor has emerged.

Hayes now wants to call as a witness a former senior party headquarters official who left last year.

What he might say is not known as the party has argued he is bound by a non-disclosure agreement and that he should not be called as he was privy to the privileged discussions with party lawyers. The party has described him as "disgruntled" but it's understood a court order could override the confidentiality agreement and this prospect has thrown the party into a panic.

The bulk of the most recent hearings was taken up by a complex argument on whether a contract exists between the party and its members and how that is formed.

Hayes has argued that the complaints process - under which she was expelled - is not independent of the party executive and that various instances demonstrate this including this removal of a lead adjudicator (Liberator 413).

She says she was entitled as a member to an independent process and that which convicted her was not.

Dias held that any contractual agreement between the party and its members depended on the constitution, and that since the complaints process originated from business motion - not a constitutional amendment - it did not form part of any such contract.

The case is due back in court in late January. Hayes is a barrister and so can represent herself but meanwhile the party's legal costs must be racking up.

## ORNITHOLOGY CORNER

The Lib Dems find themselves on the hook for £14,000 in damages and unquantified tens of thousands more in costs as the Natalie Bird case finally reaches a sort of conclusion.

'Sort of' because although the judge said the Lib Dems must pay 90% of Bird's costs, he ruled this did not include the £88,413 Bird raised from crowdfunding.

Bird has now launched yet another crowdfunding initiative to try to appeal against this aspect of the ruling, which will drag out proceedings for months yet.

This saga began in 2018 when Bird wore a t-shirt to a party event bearing the words: "Woman: adult, human, female", which was taken by some as transphobic.

Complaints were raised under the old system run by the English party and Bird was removed from the approved candidates list and banned from party office for 10 years.

She then crowdsourced sufficient money to take legal action and last year the party conceded it had breached the Equalities Act as Bird's gender critical opinions were protected by this.

That admission was rather embarrassing as the party's general election manifesto last year included a commitment to, er, "upholding the Equality Act 2010".

The judge agreed Bird could raise her claim to £45,000 for damages after the party's admission that it breached equalities legislation.

He awarded though only £14,000 saying there had been insufficient evidence of 'injury to feelings'.

The party claimed it sought to engage with Bird at several points to reach a settlement but she had not respond fully.

This limited the party's ability to settle the case and according to one report among Bird's demands for a settlement was that she should be made PPC for a winnable seat. The 10% deduction in the costs award may reflect this unwillingness to settle.

Unsurprisingly, the party's official response was: "This case relates to events that took place in 2019 under a different complaints system that has since been changed."

The old complaints system has become a convenient dumping ground for disputes, though it's unclear whether the current system would prevent what happened.

There are some important questions raised by the Bird case. If complaints are being handed in a way that puts the party on the wrong side of the law does the panel concerned - or anyone else - have access to legal advice before they reach a decision and are they required to seek this?

Also, how are periods of suspension or banning from office decided? In another case (Liberator 413) a 10-year ban was imposed that was in effect a ban for life.

If complaints panels are going to make decisions that cost the party as much as Bird's case has, who is guarding the guardians?

## GLEE CLUB

*Venue issues mean it is unclear if this can be held at Harrogate. Please look out for announcements*

# NOW'S OUR CHANCE

The age of Trump and Starmer needs a radical liberal response based on defending the NHS, rejoining the single market and developing an appeal to working class voters. Paul Hindley explains how to do this

This is not the world Liberal Democrats would have chosen, but it is the world that we have. Liberal democracy faces its greatest challenge since 1945. The far-right and overtly fascist political movements are gaining ground on an international scale.

Donald Trump's clear victory in the US presidential election has sent shock waves throughout the democratic world. America is set to have another dysfunctional four years. Trump is likely to be more extreme and far-right in his second term than he was in his first term, a term that ended with the seditious attack on the US Capitol Building on 6 January 2021.

In Europe, things are little better. In Germany, the far-right Alternative for Deutschland (AfD) party is likely to make historic gains in February's federal election, despite its use of Nazi-style rhetoric calling for the mass deportation of immigrants and asylum seekers.

France meanwhile is paralysed by political crisis with it being seemingly impossible to form a stable government in the National Assembly, as Marine Le Pen's National Rally (RN) inches ever closer to the Élysée Palace. While in Italy and the Netherlands, the far-right already leads governing coalitions of right-wing parties. All of which is set against the backdrop of Vladimir Putin's imperialist war of aggression as he seeks to stamp out Ukraine's fledgling democracy.

## GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY

Here in Britain, Labour now has a golden opportunity to achieve historic radical change. With it winning a historic landslide majority of 411 seats in the House of Commons in July's general election, along with 72 Liberal Democrats and four Greens, Labour now has the strongest progressive Parliament in British political history. Yet, despite Starmer's apparent historic victory, it is built on shallow foundations. Labour won just over a third of the popular vote. It would only take a modest Tory revival to see Starmer's large majority evaporate.

However, a currently weakened Tory Party is facing an existential challenge from Nigel Farage and Reform UK. Farage overshadows Kemi Badenoch and the rest of the Tory front bench, while they are utterly unwilling to challenge Farage or his brand of politics.

There is little ideologically that appears to now separate the current Conservative leadership and the Reform party. Even despite their 2024 landslide, if Labour squanders their opportunity to achieve radical change, then they are likely to be replaced by a right-wing Conservative government influenced by Farage or even possibly by a Tory-Reform alliance led by Farage himself. Either prospect would be a disaster for Britain.

Enflaming tensions yet further is Elon Musk, the world's richest man, the owner of the social media platform X (formerly known as Twitter) and the self-appointed cheerleader for the international far-right.

Musk has developed a personal vendetta against Keir Starmer, which began during last year's summer riots. During the US presidential campaign, he became a key backer and close confidant of Donald Trump. Since November, he has voiced his support for Reform UK, the AfD and the fascist activist Stephen Yaxley-Lennon (more commonly known as Tommy Robinson).

Added to this, are the rumours of Musk being prepared to make an eye-watering donation to Reform UK to the tune of tens of millions. Britain urgently needs to introduce a donations cap on all political parties. We cannot allow far-right plutocrats, be they Russian, Chinese, American or of any other nation to pervert the operation of British democracy.

So, how should the Liberal Democrats respond both to Starmer's Labour government and the darker international stage epitomised by Trump 2.0?

Firstly, the party must recognise the danger facing our country if Labour fails to be radical enough in office.

The Liberal Democrats have a vital role in being Labour's progressive and radical conscience in the current Parliament, especially on the NHS, social care and welfare. Secondly, the party needs the courage to take bold, decisive and progressive stances on the big issues of the day. Thirdly, the party must be leading the calls for Britain to rejoin the European Single Market. Finally, the Liberal Democrats need to reach out and appeal to more working class voters. I shall discuss each of these in turn.

Firstly, the party has rightly been leading on the NHS and social care. I was overjoyed to see health

*“The party must recognise the danger facing our country if Labour fails to be radical enough in office”*

policy at the heart of our progressive manifesto in the general election. It is vital that we hold Labour's feet to the fire when it comes to properly funding our NHS. The crisis in social care has gone unaddressed for decades. With such a strong progressive majority in Parliament, now must be the moment to forge a new consensus on funding social care.

The party is also right to hold Labour to account on social security. Labour's approach to welfare is nothing short of continuity Tory. Starmer's government may have ditched austerity in relation to a range of public services, however in relation to welfare, right-wing austerity remains the order of the day.

This was demonstrated so harshly by Labour's decision to cut winter fuel payments to the elderly. In addition, the government is considering forcing banks to monitor the accounts of welfare claimants. Such a move would be profoundly illiberal and unjust. We are absolutely right to call for Labour to scrap the two-child benefit cap. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, abolishing it would instantly lift 540,000 children out of absolute poverty. It is astonishing therefore that Labour has chosen to keep the cap in place in England and Wales. It speaks volumes to their cruel approach to welfare.

While the party has chartered a clear course in relation to healthcare and welfare, in other areas its position is unclear. Take for example three of Labour's hallmark policies, the renationalisation of the railways, the establishment of GB Energy and the Employment Rights Bill.

I support all three, however so far, the party has not taken an explicit position on any of them. Beyond proposing odd amendments, the party has chosen to abstain on all of these in the House of Commons. If a voter asked me whether the Liberal Democrats supported these policies, I honestly could not say one way or the other. If there is a more nuanced position to be taken, I do not know what that is either. The party leadership has failed to articulate a view on some of the most important policies that the government is pursuing.

The only thing worse than indecision, is making the wrong decision. This is what the party has done by choosing to oppose outright Labour's introduction of inheritance tax on farming estates, once their assets reach £1.325m. A figure that rises to £3m if a couple that own a farm pass on their property and land to their children or grandchildren.

However, farming estates will continue to receive a 50% tax relief. Meaning that instead of paying inheritance tax at 40% as all other wealthy estates do, farming estates will only have to pay 20% inheritance tax. The tax would then be payable in instalments over 10 years interest free. It is a fair and reasonable policy.

If we were in government now, we would need to find additional revenue to fill the black hole that the Tories left in the public finances. We cannot both be the party that wants to increase public spending on the NHS, social care and welfare and the party that opposes tax increases on multi-millionaire asset-owners. Taxing inheritance and the value of land is true to our Liberal heritage. Yet, we have allowed ourselves to be depicted as defenders of big landowners.

The party has gotten itself into an unnecessary policy muddle on this issue. If you are sharing the stage with

Kemi Badenoch, Nigel Farage and Jeremy Clarkson on an economic policy issue, then it might be time to find another stage to stand on.

Is the party of Gladstone, Lloyd George and Grimond seriously in favour of a tax loophole, introduced by Margaret Thatcher, that is used by the ultra-wealthy to avoid paying inheritance tax on their vast post-feudal farming estates? I certainly hope not. And no, the wealthiest farming estates are not "family farms", any more than a millionaire's mansion can be considered a family house.

Alternatively, the party may have wanted to enter a discussion as to whether the £1.325m level was too low or not. The party instead of opting for its apparent stance of outright opposition to the policy could have argued for an alternative approach. An example could be to introduce inheritance tax only on those farming estates worth more than £3m (instead of £1.325m), a figure that would rise to £6.35m if a couple chose to leave their farming estate to their immediate descendants. However, all these farming estates should have to pay the full 40% rate of inheritance tax (instead of Labour's 20% rate).

## FREE TRADE

Moving beyond inheritance tax to international trade, as Liberals, we are proud free traders. We believe that free trade leads to a prosperous economy and that it fosters economic linkages between countries, thus reducing the prospect of hostility between nations. It is also essential in ensuring a decent standard of living, especially for the poorest members of society.

Protectionism, increased trade tariffs and trade wars undermine living standards by increasing the cost of everyday goods. Yet with the prospect of an economically nationalist Trump administration, Liberal Democrats will need to ensure that no Trumpian protectionist policies cross the Atlantic. There are no winners in trade wars, only losers.

This brings me to the most important foreign policy of modern British politics, Brexit. Hard Brexit was always an implicitly protectionist project. What else could explain the decision to leave the European Single Market? If we want to protect free trade in the era of Trump 2.0, we desperately need to rejoin the Single Market (preferably via the European Free Trade Association) as soon as possible. It is reckless for Starmer to rule out British membership of the Single Market.

We Liberal Democrats need to be explicit about our support for Britain rejoining the European Single Market. And no, I do not mean as step four in a four-step policy process that most activists, let alone potential voters, can barely remember. No ifs or buts, the party must support Britain rejoining the Single Market as soon as possible.

If Labour is serious about economic growth, they need to realise the risks of being outside the Single Market, especially in a world impacted by Trump's potential tariffs.

That brings me to my final section, the need to grow the Liberal Democrats' voter base and engage with working class communities. At the general election, we only increased our share of the vote by just 0.6% since 2019. And yet due to the quirks of first past the post, we won our most seats for a century. However, beyond

our numerous victories in the so-called Blue Wall, much of the country continues to be an electoral desert for the party.

We currently do not have any MPs in any of the big English cities, beyond the south of London. This was not always the case. Go back to 2010 and we had MPs representing parts of Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield and Birmingham as well as other parts of Greater London, such as Bermondsey and Brent. We even had MPs in the so-called Red Wall, such as Burnley and Redcar. It is vital that we broaden our voter base beyond those affluent rural Blue Wall seats, predominantly in the south of England. The party needs to reconnect with voters across most of the North and the Midlands, especially with working class voters.

We should start by learning from the party's recent local council gains in places like Hull, Liverpool and Morecambe. No doubt our traditional commitment to community politics and community-based activism did a lot to achieve local successes in these areas. We need to make sure that we are organising in local communities, enabling people to take and use power, where possible, to deliver better decision making, to alleviate social hardships and to hold those in power to account.

## ACTIVIST POCKETS

But a few pockets of well-organised local community activism dotted around the country will not be sufficient, not without leadership from the national party. The party leadership needs to develop a compelling vision, along with the progressive policies needed to match it, to reach out to working class voters.

In fairness, the foundations for this have already been built. The NHS and social care are issues that matter to tens of millions across our society, especially to the poorest and most vulnerable. We must proudly continue to embrace being "The Party of the NHS" and be unwavering in our willingness to hold Labour to account should they fail to address the manifold NHS crisis.

The one policy area that Liberal Democrats desperately need to champion is fairness within the workplace. The Liberals legalised trade unions in 1870, saw the first working class MPs elected in 1874, gave the vote to millions of rural working men in 1884 and legitimised collective bargaining rights in 1906.

We should aim to foster warmer relations with the trade union movement, especially with those smaller trade unions that do not affiliate with Labour. Now would also be a great moment to revisit our historic commitments to workplace democracy, co-determination and profit-sharing within the firm.

Next, we should be unafraid of holding big bosses and big corporations to account. An excellent recent example of this can be seen from our new Lib Dem MP

*"The party leadership needs to develop a compelling vision, along with the progressive policies needed to match it, to reach out to working class voters"*

for Maidenhead, Joshua Reynolds.

Appearing on the Business and Trade Committee in December, he repeatedly questioned senior executives from Amazon as to why its workers in Coventry had chosen to go on strike so much. Reynolds did not receive answers to his questioning; however, he reminds us how important workers' rights have been and continue to be for liberals. We must demonstrate how the Liberal Democrats wish to improve people's lives, while bridging the power and wealth divide between the social classes.

Liberalism is at its best when it is a cross-class movement. A movement that unites both middle class and working class people.

As the presidential campaign of Kamala Harris discovered, liberals neglect working class voters at their peril. Are we going to neglect working class voters and force them into the arms of Nigel Farage, a reactionary Tory Party or an ineffective Labour Party? We Liberal Democrats must be unafraid to present a bold and progressive vision to working class communities across our country. A progressive anti-establishment vision that champions our radical policies on political reform, saving the NHS, advancing social care and improving living standards.

What binds together all the issues I have discussed is the need to present a comprehensive vision of radical liberalism, why it is needed now and what it hopes to achieve.

This needs to be a radical liberalism that is self-confident, rooted in values and principles and that can effortlessly speak against the evils of injustice with passion and conviction. It should be in the vanguard of the drive towards individual freedom, social justice, democratisation and internationalism. I am the co-editor (along with Ben Wood) of a new book being published this February by the John Stuart Mill Institute entitled *When We Speak of Freedom: Radical Liberalism in an Age of Crisis* (Liberator 426). It starts the process of reviving the radical liberal tradition. But it is just the first step in a long political journey.

As we move into a darker political era, the Liberal Democrats need to be clearer than we have ever been before on what our core values are and where we stand on all the big issues of the day.

Enough fudging, enough timidity and enough apathy. We must be Britain's beacon of hope. A beacon for radical change, political renewal and social justice. We must show Britain that there is a radical liberal alternative!

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# AFGHANISTAN : A COMPLICATED COUNTRY

Keith House and Tonia Craig travelled to one of the world's least visited countries as tourists in December to see Taliban control in practice

It's complicated. And not in the way I expected.

We all know the recent story of Afghanistan, don't we? We recall in the 19th century the British invaded and were chucked out. That in the 20th century there were tribal revolts against modernisation before the Soviet invasion of 1979. That in the years after the demise of the Soviet Union, the country became a breeding ground of terrorists, aided and abetted by the Taliban. That the United States and NATO invaded after 9/11, then established a shaky democracy that was removed by the Taliban when the West withdrew in chaos in 2021. We are told the local population resent the Taliban, who remain international pariahs, and the country is unsafe and unstable. That's the story we all know, isn't it? Well, not quite.

I came to be in Afghanistan as a tourist, with my partner Tonia Craig, because I had heard, despite all the official warnings, that the country was open to visitors who were even being encouraged. We travel to unusual destinations to see the reality rather than the perceived story. Afghanistan proved beyond interesting.

It is a place on the crossroads of history, part influenced by the Middle East, part by the Indian sub-continent and especially Pakistan, and part by Central Asia.

The country is one of the most beautiful in the world.

Its mountains and landscapes echo the Alps and American Canyonland, with passes and lakes that are truly gorgeous. In any other political climate it would be on travel itineraries alongside India and Nepal, and a base for more unusual places.

The Silk Road passed through here and in Kabul Mongol monuments of the Genghis Khan period are still preserved and both tranquil and spectacular. The Buddhas of Bamiyan may have been largely destroyed, but the hills above the town and the location itself remains jaw-dropping. The National Park at Band-e Amir is a winter wonderland of snow and ice, of lakes and still running streams that could easily pass for Canada or Iceland.

Yet the picture in the West remains of safety threats and, overwhelmingly, of the poor treatment of women. First, safety. Arrival in Kabul is to a run-down small airport but one that is efficient with a simple immigration process. No lengthy queues or questions from Homeland Security. Fill in a form, hand over a photo, passport stamped and you are on your way. Our visas, it is true, had to be repurchased in Dubai as we had learned that our UK issued visas would not be honoured. We meet our locally-sourced guide and on into the city we go.

Kabul today, like the others towns and places we visited, feels as secure as anywhere in Asia, if not more

so. I have felt more under threat at night in Brighton, or in many American cities. The Taliban are armed, but their function is more to keep the traffic moving and to give cursory glances at checkpoints. The local population have free movement around the country. As visitors we had to have our government issued permit briefly waved at guards from time to time, but not always, and our passports glanced at. The oddity with the Taliban was more that they were often curious and keen to have selfies with a visitor, occasionally handing their AK47s over for the fun of it. Those photos didn't make the Facebook feed, or here. Unexpected? You bet.



## WOMEN AND TAXING COMPLEXITY

The complexity of issues around women were more taxing. Before the Taliban took charge women were able to undertake a wide range of jobs. They could study through to University and have professional careers. Even in the early months of the new regime, some of that position remained unchanged. Now, not so. Education stops at the end of primary school. Women are only allowed outside of home for “women’s work” such as escorting children or shopping. We saw few on the streets of Kabul, and rarely any outside of the city. We were told women could still drive, but we saw none. Women’s clothing was less constrained than in Yemen and parts of Saudi Arabia. Head coverings were everywhere, yet the full niqab we had bought before arrival remained in Tonia’s backpack: a simple head-scarf sufficed and burkas, worn since pre-Islamic times in Afghanistan, were far from universally worn.

An early incident illustrated this complexity. It was on a visit to a popular recreation area and viewpoint up in the hills above Kabul that we initially learned of women being banned from parks. Yes, really. Our presence made us the tourist attraction for local youths, many approaching us to talk about football, cricket, and for the never-ending selfies to share with

*“I can recall no conversation with a local woman at any point during our stay. What was understood without it being seen as a contradiction of societal values was that this was not a long-term sustainable position for the country”*

friends. They were fun, these lads, and we shared some stories. Here, the presence of a woman was remarkable. It was our permits of course that made Tonia’s attendance permissible. Yet these teens and twenties keen to talk with us both and have their photos taken with me were very clear that Tonia could not be in the shots. Engagement, yes, but with limits.

We were keen to learn more, and in shops and cafes struck up conversations. What became obvious over time was a sense of relief at the current state of security and stability, but with a concern for the future of daughters who would have been expected to have future careers.

It’s complicated. The complexity was of a deeply conservative society that even before regime change would have seen those same young women give up work on marriage, ending promising jobs in professions. It is the nature of the society. Of course we only heard these

stories from men. I can recall no conversation with a local woman at any point during our stay. What was understood without it being seen as a contradiction of societal values was that this was not a long-term sustainable position for the country. “Perhaps I will leave” was a phrase heard. But where to, when no neighbouring country will offer long-term residence?

Kabul is a modern city with modern shops and services, with world brands on display from phones to cars, fashion to jewellery. It sits in a bowl of mountains

with a heaving population of six or perhaps seven million. Its congestion and burning of wood, coal and oil makes it one of the most polluted cities in the world. It retains cultural sites, many that gained investment and renewal in the US-led period. The city has a café society, of sorts, and the jumble of old and new from street traders and 21st century shops of any busy Asian or Middle Eastern city. We could have stayed here for many days exploring if time had allowed, even if the cold and pollution argued otherwise.

In the city the contrasts and contradictions jarred. We saw streets with tourist shops selling everything you





might find in an Istanbul bazaar or souk, with knock-offs of western clothing brands and watches through carpets and standard tourist tat of fridge magnets and items for mantelpieces and on to Soviet medals and old coins and notes. A jewellery quarter that could have been anywhere in the Middle East.

## PREVALENT POVERTY

Alongside all this, poverty was prevalent. Young children often with bare feet begging in the streets late into the night. “Money” is an English word known by all. In the winter cold these were heart-breaking scenes with no solution. A real consequence of being set apart from most of the international order: less trade and money transfers. The US dollar remains in demand as a hard currency to swap for the local Afghani.

If we expected to find people wary of the regime, and critical of it, as we had found quite loudly in Iran and even around the edges in North Korea, we did not find that here. I don’t believe this was through fear. People talk, everywhere. No, the opprobrium is directed in our direction, and specifically, to NATO. No electricity in the hotel at night, why? “NATO”. Poverty and lack of investment, why? “NATO”. We heard this answer time and again. Whatever our experiences of Afghan refugees in England, and we hosted a large hotel for wonderful families in Eastleigh after the 2021 evacuation, the local in-country view of the world is not the same as we receive it back home. It took some time to assimilate these responses.

On reflection my sense is that the belief in security and safety now, when set against the period of the ‘NATO occupation’, is a key factor. There are lessons here for policy-makers in the West, as there have been

too from seeking to impose Western-style cultures and democracies in places that have no such tradition.

What is my take from a short visit to this troubled place?

Surprisingly, one is laughter. We heard lots of it. From our driver stuck in the snow and ice so lacking in confidence driving in those conditions that he handed the car over to ‘the wimin’ to drive back to ice-free roads. To the young lads in the park wanting to talk about Chelsea. And to the Taliban guards wanting selfies with these curious visitors even if they were from ‘NATO’ and who laughed as the western woman driver, panicking as she approached a checkpoint and guns, showed humour and civility and remain part of humanity.

Then, there is understanding. Afghanistan has been fought over for centuries. There are few constants. Religion and trade are the stand-outs. One needs respect, the other participation. That is not easy given the history and the current politics. Liberals struggle with working through how to work with illiberal regimes. These are not the people. Talking is better than not talking. A welcoming hand beats an oppressive frown.

Afghanistan has been a place of contradictions for a millennia. It will continue to be so. I hope it can gain equality and prosperity alongside security for the future and most of all for its people. We have some changes to make in the West to the way we engage with this beautiful place. It’s complicated, Afghanistan. We should not presume otherwise.

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Keith House is Liberal Democrat Leader of Eastleigh Borough Council and Tonia Craig is cabinet member for Health and Social Policy

# UNSAFE AS HOUSES

## Crises over homelessness and substandard housing will continue unless society stops viewing homes as investments, says Martin Wrigley

Do we have a housing crisis? I would start by saying 'yes, but no'.

We do not have a housing crisis. We have several housing crises all at the same time.

We have a crisis of house prices for purchase. We have a crisis of private rental being scarce, unstable, insecure and unaffordable. We have a crisis in the lack of social homes. We have a crisis of second and investment houses, not used as homes. We have a homelessness crisis (not to be confused with rough sleeping)

Continuing to have a private developer-led, numbers driven planning system, delivering houses at a rate to maintain profits will not provide the solutions that we need. It isn't a numbers game; it's about changing social and financial behaviours and how we supply and regard homes.

I was talking to the chief executive of my local housing association recently, and he told me that we have more than enough bedrooms to house everybody.

As a society we believe that rising house prices are somehow earned, and that we should expect prices to go up forever. Houses have become financial instruments rather than homes.

### CYCLICAL CRASH

This cannot go on. If it continues without correction, we can expect a cyclical crash which will be not only chaotic but also traumatic for many.

How have we got to this point, and what do we need to do about it?

I believe it all goes back to the blessed Margaret, and politicians' inability to change some fundamentals.

Margaret Thatcher was able to put fundamental changes into societal attitudes and baked them in by tax and financial principles. Her introduction of the right-to-buy council houses was designed to move Labour voting renters to Tory voting homeowners.

I refute many politicians parroting that "everyone's dream is to own their own home". I would suggest that everyone's dream is to have a safe and secure place to call home. A reliable roof over their head. The tenure of the home is not the important issue, the important issue is the safety and security of your home.

Further erosion of renters' rights, changing banking regulation on the amount that could be borrowed for a mortgage, allowing buy-to-let mortgages and various help-to-buy schemes have all demonstrably baked in her idea that home ownership should be the only viable model.

We have a mental health crisis, part of which is driven by loneliness. We are living in smaller and smaller households.

The Blessed Margaret famously is reported to have said – "anyone aged over 35 still travelling on a bus

is a failure", and that attitude has also driven us to follow the dream of "a place of my own". That may well be right for many folks, but it is a way to drive fundamental loneliness.

I was delighted when my children came back to live with me in the family home during Covid. I'm sure that part of them thinks – "35 and living with my parents is a failure", but it isn't.

I'm not saying that living with my grown-up children doesn't have its moments, but it means that the family home is well filled, and that none of us get as lonely as we might living in a small box on our own.

How often do we hear the caustic idea of "you must get on the housing ladder". What they really mean is that bricks and mortar are the only form of saving that is worthwhile.

In terms of housing demand, I do believe we need to look at our social attitudes to multigenerational living, to living in more social groups and not allow the housebuilders to sell us a continuation of Thatcher's dream.

While talking of demand, we need to mention second homes and holiday lets too. Being from a coastal area this is a big issue. We have roughly equal numbers of second homes as we do families on the housing needs register.

Empty second homes in coastal villages are a blight on the local community. Often the owners will arrive on a Friday, with their car full of food brought from home, and depart on Sunday without having contributed to the local economy or society at all. And they may have turned the holiday cottage in a small business – paying no council tax and claiming 100% small business rate relief.

AirBnB has developed so far from its original concept it has become a real issue. The idea of an 'Air Bed and Breakfast' – making use of extra space in a lived-in house – was great. Now it has become a way to avoid holiday home regulations and taxes. We need to look at 'whole house' AirBnB as a separate category, as opposed to maximising the use of spare rooms by offering them out to those who need them for a night.

So many local authorities have lost their stock of council homes that we are in the ridiculous situation where we send homeless families to live in hotels (otherwise known as temporary accommodation). Meanwhile tourists stay in family homes. Not only is this a personal disaster for the family, often moved miles away from work and schooling without public transport, but also massive cost to the local authority that is obliged to house them.

We need to look at financial regulations, societal norms and housing supply as well.

I'll leave the social change issues to one side – that would take more space than I have here but is a key fundamental change – likely to take longer than fixing some of the supply issues.

Most of the financial behaviour that makes everything worse is driven by the financial regulations that makes only buying real estate as 'safe as houses' as an investment. Change the regulations and you change the investment decisions and relieve pressure on the homes.

Fundamentally we need to revert to houses as homes and not financial instruments.

There are different specific issues and potential solutions in each aspect, social housing, private rental, second homes and holiday rental and the cost of open market housing.

The Government needs to change the financial rules around social housing.

Social housing is usually paid for through housing benefit. This costs some £30bn per year, nearly a third of that going into the pockets of private landlords.

That is a similar sum to the cost of the affordable homes programme £11bn.

It makes financial sense to keep the public money cycling through the public sector. In the same way as it makes sense for someone who can afford it to buy their house on a mortgage.

The main thing that gets in the way of local councils building more social homes is the financial constraints on them set by government. This is in the form of the - once again frozen - Local Housing Allowance and Rent Caps that were imposed by the last government combined with obscure rules on the use of a council's housing revenue account.

When you add the right to buy into that, the blessed Margaret managed to make it really difficult for councils to build.

Now you could say – but council borrowing adds to the national debt. This is down to government defined fiscal rules, and by borrowing to build an asset, it could be ruled out.

Private rental and second homes have been allowed to become tax effective savings accounts. There are many people who have a second house that they rent out and rely on the capital increase to become their pension. I cannot blame anyone for doing that, as the setup of the financial system and taxes make that the best investment. Nothing else is as 'safe as houses'.

That does two things: it increases the cost of houses, as more people looking to buy means the market drives the price up; and it prevents investment into productive areas, such as companies that make useful things.

The UK's productivity problem is down to both a lack of investment and a reliance on cheap labour (but that is a topic for another day).

**“The tenure of the home is not the important issue, the important issue is the safety and security of your home”**

I see no reason to remove private landlords from the market, but they should be held to account as professional landlords. It shouldn't be as an investment vehicle.

With a tax regime that made investing in the stock market more effective, and properly regulated renters rights we would transform a lot of our economy.

We still give tax advantages to empty properties, allow banks to inflate prices with buy-to-let

mortgages and allow owners to force renters out so that they can increase the rent or claim to wish to sell the property, subject to new Renters Rights Bill going through parliament.

Second homes that are used, lived in and with people that are engaged in the local community are much less of an issue than second homes that are left empty for all but a few weekends a year.

Much of this would be fixed by alterations in the taxation scheme. Disallowing the switch to become a business – thus avoiding council tax and claiming a small business 100% tax relief on business rates - would help. However, they still aren't paying their way, and a high proportion of second homes in small villages can hollow out a community.

From next year councils can charge 200% council tax on second homes, but even that doesn't recompense the lack of spending in the local economy.

The final, and biggest issue is the cost of open market housing.

If we don't tackle this in a managed way, it will crash again and cause a lot of harm to a lot of people. The negative equity position of many in the late 1980s was devastating to many families.

## **STOP CELEBRATING**

Somehow, we have to stop prices increasing, and stop celebrating that they do. It isn't earned money, and it doesn't grow the economy in any real way. It may be necessary to tax gains in price of a principal dwelling.

This would not only stop the prices running away from the buyers but would also take away one of the reasons that stops people downsizing sooner. If you are living in a house that is larger than you need, today the rational decision is to wait a few years as the price will increase. If that were not the case, the rational decision becomes selling up and moving to a more effective and affordable home sooner. That could be compounded by getting rid of stamp duty for downsizing, or even get rid of it altogether.

Unless and until we change the financial system to stop houses being financial instruments and revert them to homes, we will have an issue. And even then we also have to undo the damage down by the political action to remove social housing from local authorities.

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Martin Wrigley is Liberal Democrat MP for Newton Abbot

# DYING FOR THE RIGHT LAW

## Nick Winch's mother wanted to die but could not legally hasten this. He says the Bill before Parliament may improve things but is full of problems

Many Liberator readers will have lived through the terrible experience of watching a relative or loved one reach the end of their life in a manner we would not wish on an animal let alone a fellow human being.

In my own case, my mother eventually died in 2023 at the age of 92, having made clear for nearly 30 years that she wanted no life-resuscitating treatment: she had a living will dating from 1986 expressing this wish, an enduring power of attorney dated 2007 stating the same and a current respect form on her desk for health professionals to see.

She passionately believed that people should have the right to end their lives in a manner and time of their choosing. Like many, she felt that people were just living too long and having enjoyed a long, varied and active life, she desperately wanted to avoid it ending in a prolonged, miserable way with her health deteriorating and her faculties failing. She was a member of, and planning a visit to Dignitas when Covid prevented travel and by the time restrictions were lifted, she was too infirm to make the trip unaided and the law made it problematic for me or another relative or friend to assist.

### BED-BOUND

So, instead, she spent the last two years of her life declining in every way, eventually ending up bed-bound, doubly incontinent, eating only pureed food, totally dependent on full-time care and suffering from a tragic condition called anhedonia – basically the inability to enjoy things which previously gave pleasure; in her case, family and friends, reading, current affairs, political discussion and watching Roger Federer or David Attenborough no longer appealed.

She begged the medical authorities to disconnect the pacemaker she had had fitted two years before (against her wishes but that's another issue). They were not prepared to take any action which would directly lead to her death, despite accepting she had competency to make this request and understood the implication of such an action.

Eventually, death finally came and any sadness at her passing was tempered by the regret that it did not occur a couple of years earlier, saving her precisely the end she had so earnestly wanted to avoid.

She would have supported a measure to legalise assisted dying or suicide although like me, she would probably regret that, since she was not suffering for a 'terminal illness' the proposed legislation would not, as currently drafted, apply to her.

As Dr Ben Spenser MP said in the Bill second reading debate: "Why is this Bill limited to the terminally ill and not those who are suffering without that being terminal? What even comes within the

scope of terminal illness? With the refusal of treatment and medication, conditions such as type 1 diabetes and HIV can be designated as terminal, despite being fully treatable." Indeed, I suspect that if the current Bill eventually becomes enacted, it will be legislation for the sake of legislation rather than as an intellectually coherent attempt to address a pressing and widespread problem.

The Bill as it stands is riddled with defects and inconsistencies designed to appease that small minority who feel that an assisted approach to ending suffering, pain and misery is, in some way, tantamount to condoning the wholesale slaughter of the elderly and infirm.

Other nations such as Canada and some European countries with assisted dying legislation allow for its implementation in cases of "unbearable suffering" in both a physical and mental sense, a wider interpretation which ought to be incorporated.

Firstly, let us deal with the leading red herring being put up in opposition to the Bill, the "palliative care" argument – that the measure would not be needed if better provision was made for end-of-life care and palliative treatment. Yet as Wes Streeting admits, the palliative care system is not "where it needs to be to give people a real choice" – nor is the care system in general, as Liberal Democrats have so forcefully argued.

But that it not a justification for inaction when action can and should be taken to end the suffering of those who wish to end a life not just of pain but of misery.

Indeed, many of those playing the palliative card are in essence using that argument as a cover for fundamental religious beliefs about the sanctity of life. This may, of course, have some merit; but at least call it what it is. The argument surrounding the Bill is not about a choice between life and death. It is, as surgeon Peter Prinsley MP said, "not a slippery slope. We are shortening death, not life for our patients. This is not life or death; this is death or death." There are those who wish to continue their lives and for whom the lack of decent palliative care is a personal disgrace and a social scandal, but to conflate this viewpoint into the Bill is failing to face the realities of those for whom the Bill is intended.

Another argument being deployed in opposition to the Bill is the "avaricious relative" angle. It is probably true that most people inherit at least something from the previous generation.

So where does the concept of the grasping relative come from? It can't just be the fear of seeing the inheritance disappear in care home fees. Indeed, the concept of the elderly no longer having to be smothered by their pillow-wielding children just to keep the inheritance intact – where is the evidence? Since

the Shipman case, coroners have increasingly looked into the deaths of elderly people (particularly those dying at home) yet the number of cases where there is clear evidence of people taking the lives of their elderly relatives with any suggestion of financial motive are statistically insignificant. A bigger group is, of course, the cases where life is ended by the intervention of medical professionals. Every doctor or health professional will privately admit that the practice of ending a life in this way is commonplace – even though they cannot, of course, admit to any personal involvement. Extra morphine or other medication is given with a nod and a wink to end the suffering of the patient.

This should no longer be a matter of dubious legality or the cause of potential moral problems for the doctor.

The first pillar of the code of medical ethics is that the wishes of the patient are paramount. When a patient has consistently expressed a view over a period of time about the treatment (or lack of it) which they desire, that wish should be respected. The proposed legislation ducks this issue, requiring the patient to express their view at the time.

What happens if they are no longer able to do so? Are their long-standing wishes ignored? What happens if there is an enduring power of attorney in place? Does that no longer count for anything? While there may be a technical difference between life-prolonging and life-ending treatment, the result for the suffering patient is the same – a longer life than they would wish.

The draft legislation also requires the patient to be able to self-administer their life-ending treatment. What about the patient with advanced MS who cannot operate a syringe or the person who has lost the ability to swallow or even just the individual in an enduring coma without control over the muscles in their hands or their oesophagus? How can they be helped when the Bill does not allow for a relative or carer to assist?

Indeed, I know of someone whose partner has progressive MS and who cannot imagine being compelled to administer her partner's treatment even if the patient wishes it but cannot do it herself. When the time comes, must the pair of them attempt to predict the time at which self-medication becomes impossible? And what if the disease is not deemed at that stage to be "terminal" in the legal sense defined in the Bill? Furthermore, the Hippocratic concept of "Do no harm" should also be interpreted as meaning "Do not prolong harm". In Hippocrates' time, the concept of degenerative death never existed. It is the creation of modern medicine. Surely there should be the right not to have to end our lives in unendurable suffering and agony.

There are other issues which need to be addressed if the Bill is to become a meaningful Act of Parliament. The Bill rightly states that no medical professional

*“A small minority feel than an assisted approach to ending suffering, pain and misery is tantamount to condoning the wholesale slaughter of the elderly and infirm”*

would be under an obligation to participate in an assisted death, but the patient should also have the right to be referred to another medical professional who is in principle prepared to operate under the terms of Act. There is a postcode lottery in many aspects of health care. Let us remove the bank balance lottery where assisted dying is available to those who can afford to travel to Switzerland while others are unable to get similar help and there needs to be clarification concerning the life assurance policies where suicide negates payments. Should not people be able, as in South Australia for example, to

register for assisted dying in advance for when the time comes. This particularly applies to patients with illnesses which will ultimately prove fatal but at an unpredictable time so they have the ability to resort to assisted dying as and when the need arises.

## **GROSS ABUSE**

Above all, the Government needs to ensure adequate Parliamentary time to scrutiny of the Bill – not just to ensure that all issues are properly debated, but also to ensure that it cannot be talked out by those opposed to it. It would be a gross abuse of the legislative system if parliamentary games were to determine whether the Bill is passed or not – that should be a matter for the expressed wish of all Parliamentarians, not just the result of tactical wheeler-dealing by a handful of zealots.

Like all legislation which focuses on issues of morality there will always be grey areas. It is impossible to legislate adequately to cover or anticipate every circumstance, but from a Liberal perspective, an individual has freedom of choice over most aspects of their lives - where to live, who to love, what to do, what to think and to say.

A Liberal ought to accept that they should also have the freedom of choice over how and when to end that life and the role of legislation should not be to make it hard (risking the botched suicide or the unnecessary trauma for, and possible prosecution of, those left behind).

Watching the final weeks and months of my mother's life, it became clear that a life not worth living is an existence not worth having. Whether our politicians have the courage, integrity and humanity to listen to the clear views of the public remains to be seen. The fear is that any legislation which can secure a Parliamentary majority may so insipid, tightly-drawn and limited that it fails adequately to address the principle issue facing so many people at the end of their lives.

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Nick Winch is a member of the Liberator Collective

# MAYORS' NESTS

## Labour's devolution reforms pose a serious threat to the Liberal Democrat approach to local campaigning, says Chris White

It's always nice to have a Government White Paper just before Christmas since this allows misinformation to spread round the system frantically for days on end before someone can cry: "ave you actually read it?"

In a number of Liberal Democrat meetings there were those who affirmed with confidence that this May's county council elections were going to be cancelled, more or less everywhere. I was rung up by the group leader on another county council who had been told by the Tory leader of that council that Hertfordshire was 'gung-ho' about moving to a unitary county council and that the May elections would therefore not take place.

The truth is rather different: no gung-ho, no agreed local solution and certainly no opportunity to re-lay the patio this year. But in some places, there may be early legislation (it takes more than a White Paper to cancel a ballot even in this country).

In fact the reorganisation of local government in the remaining two-tier areas of England (Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland went through this a while back) is a something of an incidental in the White Paper.

### POWERS IN THE LAND

The main story is the 'rise of the mayor'. The word 'mayor' has morphed hugely in 30 years, from a chain-wearing ceremonial throw-back to a modern political operator, more in common with continental usage (it's originally a Merovingian viceroy from the 8th century).

It has also become rather more than simply a directly elected leader, as has been seen with the mayor of Greater Manchester and, of course, Greater London where the mayors have become what you might call 'a power in the land'.

Mayors will be everywhere and will command large geographies (well over a million people and often more than one existing county). Their 'competencies' will include: transport and local infrastructure; skills and employment support; housing and strategic planning; economic development and regeneration; environment and climate change; health, wellbeing and public service reform; public safety (which means that the pointless, remote and unloved police and crime commissioners are on their way out – not before time).

The remaining shire districts will all be done away with. Single purpose authorities (which will have notable similarities to London boroughs and Metropolitan Districts) will normally serve populations of at least 500,000, which incidentally makes them rather larger than London boroughs, hinting perhaps that there could in due course be reorganisation in London as well.

It is remarkable to look at how things have changed since the early nineties when the panic over the poll tax led to an attempt to simplify local government and

so supposedly save money for local taxpayers. Then it was all about the death of the counties. But dinosaurs have a nasty bite and there emerged very few district-sized unitaries.

Berkshire was remarkable in this respect because the county council was abolished entirely and the existing districts took over many of the functions without any other reform, merger or reorganisation. In most cases one or two districts became unitaries with the rest of the county unchanged.

All we can safely say about the current mishmash is that small unitaries are vulnerable because they lack economies of scale. But even large ones (including Birmingham, the largest of them all) suffer mismanagement and financial difficulties. And it is not at all clear that reducing tiers of government and numbers of councillors has led to any substantial long-term savings or improvement in performance.

But the wheel has turned and so we are back to county unitaries, a number of which already exist (Buckinghamshire, Wiltshire etc). For counties with very large populations like Hertfordshire and Essex, the county is likely to be split up: into two in Hertfordshire and three in Essex (or so it is believed at the time of writing).

The irony is that these authorities will not be unitary: there will be a mayoral tier above them doing the interesting strategic stuff and formally having the ear of Government. There will also be an expansion in the number and size of 'third tier' authorities. Just as Hereford City Council is legally a parish council, the larger third tier authorities, be they city, town or parish councils by name, perform significant functions in what may broadly be termed the public realm.

In some counties new large and wealthy third tier authorities will need to be created for the first time to avoid minor services being dealt with by a hopelessly remote 'unitary'. In my county there will for instance be, I presume, a Watford Town Council, a Hemel Hempstead Town Council, a Stevenage Town Council and – grandly – a St Albans City Council (cathedral city, you see).

The services can include parks, play areas, markets, grass cutting and whatever else works for the relevant area. And, no doubt, ceremonial mayors for those who value such things.

Elsewhere in the White Paper, we learn that the ridiculous half-baked Oflog will be abolished, having achieved precisely nothing. (Another Gove legacy reduced to a footnote.)

The Government wishes to reform local audit fundamentally (good: most councils are years behind on audit sign offs) and rebuild the 'vital early warning system' of councils getting into trouble. It also wants audits to offer the sector 'insights'. This looks like the return of the Audit Commission, which used to perform



- or at least arrange - audits and provide an early warning system of problems.

But, says the paper mysteriously, we must avoid returning to a bloated Audit Commission. So the new body is not going to be Oflog, which looked very much like a renaissance Audit Commission, nor a resurrected Audit Commission. It's totally different while being entirely the same. Go figure, as accountants might say.

It's clearer in relation to councillor misconduct: there will be a return of the totally discredited Standards Board for England. No doubt it will have a new name, to show that it is different in a samey sort of way. The English Standards Board, for instance.

Away from regulation, there will be a return of structure plans, merged by the last Labour Government into regional spatial strategies and then mindlessly done away with altogether by Eric Pickles, he who got rid of the Audit Commission so successfully.

Structure plans (now renamed spatial development strategies) are much missed. Over the past decade or so, planning authorities in many parts of the shires have had to work in an absurd vacuum: developing planning policies and then showing them to the upper tier authority which has responsibility for transport, education provision and other infrastructure planning, hoping their draft plan would not be too badly mauled by the strategic authority's objections.

It was always obvious that the infrastructure planning and broad areas for housing development should be done first by the upper tier authority, with the district planners falling into line behind the plan. This was what used to happen after all.

So what are the real issues facing the Liberal Democrats and will there really be devolution?

The mayoral tier looks promising provided that the Government is sincere. But Governments are not generally sincere about devolution any more than they are about funding support. The structures look like a promising framework, but it might not be too cynical to say that this is a way of getting key local leaders into a room every so often in order to tell them what to do.

## PHYSICALLY REMOTE

For district council functions, admittedly only a small part of local government functions overall, decision-makers will be more remote physically and noticeably less numerous – a new unitary council will quite possibly have two councillors where currently there are six or seven. These councillors will require considerably more casework support than is currently the norm.

This centralisation may, as we have seen, be mitigated by new third tier authorities in the places which currently don't have them. But it will need meaningful transfer of functions like parks and public realm for the new third tier authorities to be attractive to serious candidates.

The new mayors will on the face of it have as little accountability as with police and crime commissioners.

*“There is much to worry about in general and even more to worry about as a party”*

The power of scrutiny was always of questionable usefulness and without meetings in public where there can be meaningful votes – basically the right to say ‘no’ – we have an elective dictatorship. Boris Johnson was as Mayor of London challenged by the Greater London Assembly: did he ever really materially change things as a result of their

views?

Couple this with the absence of proposals for electoral reform for council elections – and especially over the mayoral elections – then there is a real problem of mayors having no real mandate whatsoever. If a mayor can be elected on, say, 37% of the vote (not an unrealistic assumption) then that mayor does not command majority support and politics will be brought further into disrepute when he or she takes unpopular decisions. English local and regional government is becoming an outlier in the UK in terms of electoral systems.

And if you elect just one person to be basically the council at strategic level, the chances of diversity are greatly reduced. There will be a lot of middle-aged white men exercising very considerable powers.

Big authorities, especially single member big authorities, are difficult for the Liberal Democrats, who can conquer a ward or a division but find the big prizes much more challenging because of the level of membership and historic activity. District councils in particular have been fertile ground because we can work our way through smaller electoral units: county-wide campaigns can be rather hard work! Region-wide elections are especially daunting in practical terms.

And few councillors also mean that there is less money coming into local parties. Many local parties now depend on councillor tithes. There will need to be a new era of active fund-raising for local elections – and fund-raising in the real sense, not annual dinners, pizza-and-politics or quiz nights.

While there are upsides to the reforms there is much to worry about in general and even more to worry about as a party. 72 MPs derive ultimately from a strong councillor base. That base will be challenging to maintain and the publicity that a mayor can produce for him or herself could easily crowd out the plucky Lib Dem council group leader. We will need to adjust fast to an entirely new game.

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Chris White is a Hertfordshire county councillor, former leader of St Albans and principal councillor representative on the Liberal Democrat Federal Board

# FROM THE UKRAINE FRONTLINE

Kiron Reid found himself under fire in Ukraine and found that while more people feel a peace deal is needed, they will never trust Russia

I spent two weeks in Ukraine in November, two years after spending a month in Zaporizhzhia and in Odesa and some other places during the first winter of the war. Then I visited colleagues from the university where I volunteer, and from election observation work, met friends and volunteer projects.

This time I was entirely in Zaporizhzhia, little more than 20 miles from the front line. As on my previous visit I was lucky – immediately after I left there was a large increase in the Russian attacks on the energy infrastructure, and the planned power cuts increased significantly to cope with that.

Still, the buildings in Zaporizhzhia (as the district heating plants were working) were warmer than many houses in England. The missile terror also increased. The ‘air alerts’ increased throughout my time there so there were alarms throughout the day and regularly throughout the night.

At first they didn’t bother me much as many of my friends ignored them, but as time went on they got on my nerves a lot, when you could hear the sirens, the pop pop pop of air defence trying to shoot down missiles and drones, sometimes explosions (on the other sides of the city), and in the university halls where I stayed some people spent the nights in corridors, other friends slept in bathtubs or cupboards.

## MISSILE STRIKE

A few days after I left a missile struck a garage and supermarket on a main road that I went along nearly every day. Two friends narrowly missed being among the nine killed but another told me of the people he knew burned alive in their car.

Yet as the Russians blow up roads and buildings, they are being repaired, supermarkets and car showrooms are blown up and others opened (I saw several still empty destroyed in the first year of the war), supermarkets and shopping malls are well stocked - including with much equipment for the military - and most people carry on life as

normal.

That included many at Zaporizhzhia National University where they now had ‘offline’ classes again for the first time since before Covid. Sure, most classes are online, including with students in the city, other parts of Ukraine (the relatively safer west), in other European countries and in the occupied territories.

Much of the regional catchment area of this large state university is still occupied by Russia. Or towns like Orikhiv my friend Eldar’s home town, are basically uninhabitable being on the frontline. When I joined first year students, and the student council organised an informal English language speaking club, we met in the basement as the makeshift air raid shelter, giving an illusion of more safety.

The students were delighted to meet a visitor from Britain. One who has continued to visit conferences in Ukraine is Michael Dobson, an eminent Shakespeare scholar. I know that many Lib Dems have been to Ukraine to show their support as well. As reported elsewhere in this issue, it is good that John Smithson went, and people really appreciate the visits and support from foreigners, especially from Britain. Sarah Green MP of the Liberator Collective is another, and American lawyer and Liberal Dan Press said he’d gone to visit a colleague and friend. Ukrainians appreciate



it when I tell them about the flags I see in many houses in city streets, towns and villages across our country.

What did they ask me about? People are worried: about Trump, about call ups, about the Russian advance and destruction. The first person I met on a 19 hour overnight train from Lviv asked me what Trump would do, and it continued like that.

We agreed that Donald Trump is crazy and unpredictable, so he might be crazy and unpredictable in a way that benefits Ukraine. Maybe because so many people are making fun of Donald Trump for being Putin's whore, he might want to do something to show he is independent to support Ukraine before trying to negotiate a deal.

Trump surely realises that he has to get in a stronger position to negotiate a deal that he says he wants to end the war. People asked me when I thought the war would end, partly because I have international experience, including as a diplomat in the Balkans. Partly, I think, just because there's a foreigner visiting.

I told them that two years previously I had said that the war would end quickly, that the Russians would be defeated, that Ukraine was being supplied with the air defence and the military equipment that it needed, and that prediction was wrong. So this time I wasn't sure. But still, Russia's economy is struggling, and it might collapse, but it's throwing such a volume of people at Ukraine that Ukraine can't resist.

There seemed to be more fatalism than when I was there before - the Russians have destroyed everything in the east let them have it - was the attitude among some people I spoke to. This among Russian speaking people in the frontline region of the war - they are talking of the neighbouring areas as well as cities like Mariupol that have been obliterated.

They want Ukrainian young people to stop being killed - their friends, former students, family members. And yet there's plenty of defiance still and life as normal (I guess you have to) and repairs and improvements being made even as Russia blows things up. There were more fine wine shops, more coffee kiosks and beer kiosks and good Georgian restaurants operating too.

One young man heavily criticised Zelenskiy. He complained of wealth and corruption, also the allegation that the wealth of former President Poroshenko has increased (I pointed out the great work that chocolate magnate Poroshenko does making donations of drones and equipment and food for the front).

That young man though is one of the very few I have met who has done nothing patriotic, nothing to help the war effort or his fellow civilians, while himself enjoying an exemption from call up due to his PhD studies.

But definitely there was more pessimism than in the national(ist) narratives. Many other Ukrainians I know are abroad from Portugal to Oxford, Canada, China, New Zealand and Sweden. The vast majority

*“People are worried: about Trump, about call ups, about the Russian advance and destruction”*

stayed at home or returned home even though nowhere in Ukraine is safe. I can't criticise a boy for wanting to live normal comfortable life with possession, an iPhone, cat and girlfriend.

## **UNREALISTIC AND UNWISE**

Ukrainians can't trust Russia without actual security guarantees. While I think joining NATO is unrealistic and unwise - not

that Russia and Putin need provocation to be barbaric - there can't be any belief in peace without actual security. As far as I can see that would mean European troops enforcing peace - like South Korea rather than ineffective 'peacekeepers' like Lebanon. This means taxpayers money but the war wastes more money and Russia must pay for reconstruction.

I was back in England in time for the Lib Dem annual dinner in Liverpool. The guest speaker was former Lib Dem leader Vince Cable. He spoke eloquently and firmly about the need to support Ukraine and about having visited during the war. He then was pathetic on a simple question from Helen Foster-Grime of Cheadle about using confiscated Russian assets to rebuild and support Ukraine.

Vince panicked and equivocated and said it was very difficult. That was disappointing but it shows that people in the political establishment still need convincing despite the public campaigning by many supporters of Ukraine including Kira Rudik.

How is it not a no-brainer to use confiscated Russian assets to support Ukraine when Russia is engaged in an illegal war, committing regular atrocities, slaughtering civilians and breaking all the international treaties that it signed up to including commitments under the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe?

Some online populist commentators want to appease Russia. Fortunately farmers like the Pick-Ups For Peace group just get on with support, as do the trade union based Ukraine Solidarity Campaign as an antidote to the Putin apologists on the Left. Zaporizhzhia was hit badly again a few days ago - a missile strike killing 13 people, a tram, cars destroyed, people burnt alive - all civilians killed. I'm happy to discuss comparisons with atrocities in the Middle East with anyone (or Africa or Asia), nothing changes that the missile terror has to be ended.

More positively a good motion on confiscated Russian assets that the Lib Dem MP for Tunbridge Wells, Mike Martin and a cross party group put down gives the Government an impetus to act. My Ukrainian colleagues treated me to food and drink at a picnic, a trip to the Zaporizhzhia State Circus, still performing in the big top and supplies for my 19 hour train journey back to Poland. These people want to be normal modern Europeans with a good quality of life, that is all. The barbarians have to be defeated.

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Kiron Reid is a member of the Liberator collective and has been a regular visitor to Ukraine since 2014

# KEEP CALM AND CARRY ON

## Normality reigns in Kyiv but mass emigration poses dangers for Ukraine's future, says John Smithson

November 2024 was the 25th Anniversary of the founding of Turbota pro Litnih Ukraine (TPL - Age Concern Ukraine in English) so they decided to hold an event to celebrate.

I spent about six years regularly visiting Ukraine and working with chief executive Galina Poliakovna to support and develop TLU in numerous towns and cities; mainly in the western half of Ukraine. Given my involvement, she invited me to attend so I went for a week.

The journey there was a bit tedious; after a flight to Krakow, the bus to Kyiv took some 16 hours including a two hour wait at the border. All our passports were collected by Polish guards and after about an hour they were returned.

We then all had to get off the bus while the luggage was checked – just what they were looking for was not clear.

We were then checked by a Ukrainian border guard who was very suspicious of me and spent a full minute staring at me before asking me my name and stamping my passport. After that, we arrived in Kyiv at about 12 noon. It was noticeable, that all the way, street lighting in towns and villages was maintained.

### DRONE ATTACK

Kyiv was much the same as my last visit in October 2022. Then, there was a drone attack which did quite a bit of damage to an office block, their glass bridge, and some other sites, and killed a police officer on his way to work. This time there were no attacks and hardly any air raid warnings. Overall, the number of air raid warnings fluctuates quite a lot, varying from hardly any to quite significant. The Ukrainian air force are very efficient at destroying Russian drones and very few get through.

Kyiv is operating very much as any large commercial city does. There is a constant stream of traffic early morning, with rush hour traffic of commuters travelling to work. The Metro train service is crowded and keeps running at all times except when there is an

air raid warning.

Street lighting is maintained in the early morning and then until the late evening curfew which lasted until 5 am.

Electricity is turned off for three hours every day, although at varying times and with very little notice as to when. Most shops and restaurants however have hired portable generators which noisily provide power for this period.

The hotel I stayed at had signs telling us to go to the cellar if there was an air raid warning. As far as I could make out there were very few takers, and most people blithely ignored the warnings and carried on as usual.

As a sign of normality, I saw a team of people busily erecting Christmas decorations in the city centre; a sign of confidence about the future I felt. There were also numerous signs posted on lamp posts inviting people to visit Kyiv when they had won the war and peace had again been established.

A lot of the people I met were largely older benefitting from the services provided by TLU. I visited their premises at Zhitomer (some 50 miles to the west), where they very proudly showed me all the work they were doing, knitting balaclavas and mittens and making warm clothing for the soldiers. Despite their age, they are totally committed to this work and produce many hundreds, if not thousands of such items; all of which were transported by the local police or army to the front. This happens not just at their Zhitomer premises but at all the other TLU premises and is a significant provision in aid of the war effort.

The premises are relatively small and crowded with materials for knitting and making clothing. Their mood was exceptionally very positive, and they clearly enjoyed their work and had satisfaction in knowing that they were doing something practical to help the war effort. No hint was given of anything else other than a certainty that, in the end, they would emerge victorious.

This spirit, not of complacency, but of a real belief in

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their future, came across very strongly wherever I went.

The ambience portrayed and demonstrated in shops, cafes and restaurants was real, positive and welcoming with no hesitation or uncertainty. They were all open during the day until late evening with very friendly, positive and helpful staff. There might have been fewer customers than in normal times, but overall people were living their lives, more or less, as they always had done.

I also visited a street market in Kyiv. This was at least half a mile long, set back from the street itself but with stalls on either side of the space. They were selling every sort of edible goods imaginable as well as anything and everything which could be transported to the site for sale. It was a very crowded area with a lot of trade going on.

In the UK this would be banned immediately on grounds of health and safety as the meat, for example, was just laid on the stall and not wrapped at all. But in Kyiv, everybody was happy with the arrangements.

Saturday evening was much as in English towns with hordes of teenagers/early 20s out enjoying themselves. I was also taken to a concert where there were at least 1,000 people attending. There was a full range of ages attending, but mainly young people for whom the event was specially devised.

Apparently, there had been a series of such events where young, up and coming entertainers, singers and dancers had competed for attention and success. There were a lot of winners from the various categories with each one performing their act. This event comprised a lot of presentations to singers and dancers and the whole event was one of excitement, pure enjoyment and entertainment. One specific act, worthy of a mention, was a serving soldier singing his song. This was rapturously received by the whole audience.

Another event I was taken to was a male voice choir who were immaculate in their presentation and singing. There were about 200 people there, all apparently intellectuals I was told. A much more sober event but still very entertaining. The presentations to quite a number of individual members were made by an invited church leader. He made a short welcoming speech and was the only person that I heard to make a specific mention of the war, and this was to say no more than that the event was a pleasant diversion from the travails of the war.

Overall, the people of Kyiv have come to terms with the situation and got used to the prevailing conditions. Morale is high and there were no signs of any real worries or concerns. The mood was one of accepting the reality but also one of determination to keep going for as long as it takes to win.

Ukraine gained its independence from the USSR in 1991, and the people generally show very strong support for their country and determination to do whatever they have to do to survive. It must however

*“While it is very understandable for women with young children to seek to leave Ukraine, overall it is not helpful for the future stability and security of Ukraine”*

be pointed out that this is the position as I saw it in Kyiv itself. Apart from the peripheral damage that has been done, Kyiv is more or less unscathed by the war. It is only the serving soldiers who are Kyiv residents who have in reality faced the horrors of the war.

Having said that, there are serious concerns for the future which I was told about. They are about the demographics of Ukraine's population.

## **FEMALE EMIGRATION**

Ukraine is geographically a large country and before the current war its population

was around 40 million. But the advent of war has led to the emigration of large numbers of mainly female Ukrainians to various countries to the West. Eight million women (and children) aged between 29 and 49 have emigrated to the West – leaving their, generally older, parents behind. This places a serious burden on the remaining population as they are much more likely to need support than the people who have left.

While it is very understandable for women with young children to seek to leave Ukraine, overall it is not helpful for the future stability and security of Ukraine as a nation. On my journey to Ukraine, I met a few women who had emigrated and were returning to Ukraine. Not it would seem, permanently, but just to visit friends and relatives.

It is also the case that very many fewer women from eastern Ukraine have made the journey to the west. They comprise only 16% of all the women and children who have emigrated. And in reality, they are the ones who have the greatest incentive to emigrate. But, they also have much greater difficulty in travelling westwards. This is just a statement of fact and not one which can easily or readily be countered.

Very few men managed to emigrate before men of serviceable age were not allowed to leave Ukraine and are now being called up for service. The numbers of killed and wounded Ukrainian servicemen and women are not revealed. It is however common for areas to be designated for remembrance of deceased soldiers. There is a large area at the southern end of Khreschatyk Street - Kyiv's main street - which is so designated and is full of small flags, each one commemorating a soldier who has been killed.

The current population of Ukraine is now 29 million people. Of these 12 million or 40% are economically active. This leaves 17 million children or people with a disability who need support in some form or another.

Mathematically, it means that each fit person has to support 1.4 people – an onerous and maybe untenable situation

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John Smithson was a field officer with Age Concern and is a former Liberal Democrat parliamentary candidate and councillor

# SLICING UP RED LEICESTER

Leicester East saw the only Tory gain at the 2024 general election and Leicester South a shadow cabinet member beaten by an independent who campaigned on Gaza. Alistair Jones explains what's been happening

In a general election with an overwhelming swing to Labour, there were a handful of constituencies that bucked the trend in England. Two of them were in the city of Leicester – Leicester East and Leicester South.

The starting point when examining these results is to bear in mind that all politics is local. The national media fixate on national swings, and talk about the electing of the next prime minister. In this, they forget that a general election is 650 individual constituency elections. Each will have its own quirks and peculiarities. The aggregation of results tends to hide that local individuality.

Within the city of Leicester, there had also been significant local election results in 2023, when Labour came close to losing control of the city council for the first time since the 2003 local elections.

This was despite the fact that 53 of the 54 councillors elected in 2019 were Labour. In 2023 the Conservative Party made a gain of 17 councillors, the Greens three and the Liberal Democrats two. This had been on top of splits within the Labour Party, as a result of de-selections and party in-fighting over the retention of an elected city mayor.

## RIVEN WITH DIVISION

Consequently, 19 councillors had been de-selected. Thus, the Labour Party was riven with divisions, and these were exacerbated by central and regional party diktat on local candidate selection. In the 2023 local elections, these divisions were exploited by a number of local politicians, who targeted particular demographics within the city – and in particular wards. They argued that Labour was not interested in the ethnic minority representation of the city, noting how 15 of the 19 de-selected councillors came from an ethnic minority background. In those local elections, some former-Labour councillors gained re-election in the same ward but under a different party label, building on their own personal support, while also exploiting the divisions within the local Labour Party.

Leicester East was the only Conservative gain on general election night. It was presented as a huge bombshell of a result but, to locals at least, was not surprising. The Leicester East campaign was also complicated by local issues. There were 10 candidates. Three of them, in effect, were Labour candidates. Keith Vaz, who had been Labour MP from 1987 to 2019, stood for One Leicester. He believed his history with the constituency would stand him in good stead to gain re-election. From his perspective, much of the local constituency Labour Party owed their position to his previous electoral success and would support him.

Vaz was confident in achieving victory. The national media were also fixated on his potential victory, with many national news outlets having cameras at the count (on a scale not seen in previous elections). Secondly, there was the sitting MP, Claudia Webbe, who had held the seat in 2019 but with a massively reduced majority. Some of this diminution in support in 2019 came because she had been parachuted into the constituency, as well as her position on Kashmir which had alienated much of the Leicester East electorate who were of Indian origin.

Webbe had been removed from the Labour Party over criminal proceedings, but believed her Corbynite credentials and her track record of constituency work would enable her to gain re-election as an Independent. Finally, there was the official Labour candidate, Rajesh Agrawal, who, like his predecessor, had been parachuted in by the party, having previously worked for the Mayor of London. A safe pair of hands, it was hoped he would hold the seat against, in particular, Keith Vaz.

Two of the candidates were effectively Conservatives: Shivani Raja, the official candidate, and Nagarjun Agath, who had resigned from the local Conservative Party when he failed to gain the nomination, and stood as an Independent. There was also a strong local Liberal Democrat candidate, Zuffar Haq, a well-known local Green candidate, Mags Lewis, a Reform UK candidate, and two other Independent candidates.

The question over Leicester East was how the votes could split. There was speculation the Labour and Conservative support might both split, enabling Zuffar Haq to sneak through the middle to win. In the early stages of the campaign, there were many more Liberal Democrat fliers and posters across the constituency, than from any other party or candidate, suggesting significantly higher levels of support than previously won. In hindsight, the Liberal Democrat campaign may have peaked too soon, although Haq came third, more than doubling the Liberal Democrat vote.

As it was, while the Labour vote split, with Agrawal coming second, Webbe fourth and Vaz fifth, the Conservative vote did not split. Shivani Raja's team ran a canny campaign, using a mix of traditional billboards, participating in hustings, and a social media campaign targeting younger voters.

Surprisingly, as a percentage of votes, the Conservative vote dropped by more than 7% compared to 2019, whereas Labour's dropped by more than 29% (much of that going to Vaz, Webbe, and Haq).

If you look to the local council elections from the previous year, Labour lost 10 from 16 councillors in wards that are in this constituency – all bar one to the

Conservatives. The divisions within the party were very obvious in Leicester East. Hence the base for a Conservative gain at the parliamentary level the following year. Much of this was missed in the national reporting of results.

The Leicester South constituency was one of six in England that saw Labour lose to an Independent candidate. It was arguably the most prominent as the incumbent MP, Jonathan

Ashworth, had been expected to hold a major role in an incoming Labour cabinet. As with four of the other Independent candidate gains, the issue of Labour's position on Gaza was a prominent factor. The lack of a condemnation of Israel's perceived disproportionate response to the Hamas attack of 7 October 2023, had led to splits within the Labour Party across the country. In Leicester South, this was the most important issue for Shockat Adam and his team, as evidenced in Adam's acceptance speech after his election victory.

The question here, however, is whether the Gaza issue alone would be enough for Ashworth to lose more than 20,000 votes from the 2019 result. Add this issue to Ashworth's refusal to rule out sending asylum seekers back to Taliban-controlled Afghanistan - which happened in an interview in the middle of the election campaign - and him saying a future Labour Government would send migrants from countries like Bangladesh back to their countries of origin, you could start to see a reaction against him. Noting that almost a third of voters in Leicester South are Muslim, and throw in the deselection of local council BAME candidates resulting in council losses to the Greens and the Conservatives in the previous year's local elections, as well as the general upheaval within the Labour Party across the city, and there is the beginning of a perfect storm.

## GAZA RESPONSE

Yet it is the issue of the Labour Party's response to the situation in Gaza that sits centre stage. A phenomenally effective and targeted campaign was run on this issue. Even on polling day, there were people holding banners or placards about Gaza outside polling stations. Some of this campaigning may not have been run by the official t Adam team. During the campaign, there were other fliers describing Ashworth as 'Genocide Jon', as well as extra inflammatory materials that breach electoral rules but were not



attributed to any formal campaign team.

In this respect, the campaigning in Leicester South was particularly nasty. Concerns had been raised previously around what Sir Peter Soulsby, the elected mayor of Leicester who was speaking in the aftermath of his 2023 election victory, described as "the weaponisation of religion". In one of the most diverse cities in the country, such an accusation is not made lightly.

There will be much conjecture as to the extent to which the splits within the local Labour Party impacted upon these results, and in particular, around the issue of ethnic minority candidacy and representation.

All three Leicester parliamentary constituencies have been treated akin to personal fiefdoms by previous Labour MPs, going back to the 1980s and 1990s. Consequently, the central and regional party had held little sway. In 2023 and 2024, the central Labour Party decided to reassert its authority, regardless of the short-term electoral cost. Leicester may be one city but it has three parliamentary constituencies which rarely communicate with each other, even – or is it especially – when all three MPs come from the same party. That local infighting has left a rather nasty legacy for the Labour Party, which is being exploited and exacerbated with allegations of racism.

Having lost two of the three seats in the city, there is a need to rebuild and to re-connect with local communities. Local problems, however, will make matters worse. If the city council has to issue a section 114 notice – in effect declaring they don't have the money to run the council – the local Labour Party will get the blame. This may happen in the next financial year, and that will fall on the elected mayor, Labour councillors and any future Labour Party general election candidates. Red Leicester no more?

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Alistair Jones is associate professor in politics at De Montfort University Leicester

# IT WON'T BE LIKE THAT NEXT TIME

Complacency in a dangerous world is no substitute for leadership and vision. 2024 was then and a new approach is needed, writes Gareth Epps

Being nice gets you so far. In a world where the net satisfaction ratings with the prime minister and the two far-right opposition parties vary between minus 31 and minus 41 points, being merely irritating to some might be considered a shrewd tactical move.

It certainly helped generate much-needed publicity that combined with a ruthlessly effective ground campaign that largely learned the lessons of 2019 and helped the party to a record seat total off the back of those 2019 second places and a monumentally corrupt and inept Tory government.

That was then, though. The 2024-29 Parliament brings a set of challenges completely different to the last. While many of the talented additions on the Lib Dem benches have set to work effectively holding the Government to account, often for fixing the messes left by their Tory opponents, a broader front approach is needed.

The party is lucky enough to have a talent pool in the Commons of a quality not seen in a century. However, and the dearth of media coverage is but one indicator, that is not enough. There are reasons why the party hasn't successfully defended 70-plus seats in a century.

## NARROW PATHWAY

Electoral arithmetic shows that the pathway to grow the Lib Dem presence in Parliament is very narrow. Clearly, building fortress-like incumbency is vital. The tiny number of on-paper targets largely comprise historically safe Tory seats that remained out of reach in July.

Unlike most previous elections, the opportunity to make progress against Labour is limited; the swing of the pendulum towards a Tory resurgence would quickly put the party on the defensive. It may be possible for 2025's local elections to further damage the Tory campaign machine for the long term; but beyond that, the low-hanging fruit is limited. This is partly a result of the disciplined anti-Tory messaging necessary in 2024.

Moreover, the straitened approach of the party in recent years was practically necessary; its logical conclusion was that similar campaigns to be fought across a number of seats; but that approach is unlikely to be sufficient to break the party onto another level.

The Lib Dem general election review report acknowledges the challenge without necessarily pointing the way forward. It acknowledges the price paid for success, in terms of lost deposits, an absence of membership recruits and the narrowness of the forward path against Labour. Only six seats where the Lib Dems came second are Labour-held; not

necessarily a consequence of the party having no clear Labour-facing message. The 'missed opportunity' is recognised. What we are not seeing is any recognition of the policy agenda or alternative prospectus, or leadership, needed in challenging times.

Fundamentally, the public widely understand that the country is broken. People want to know why everything is so expensive and wages aren't keeping pace; why schools and the NHS are struggling to function, leaving the most vulnerable often to suffer the most.

Demographically, those likely to be turned by the scapegoating of Farage and the Tories tend also to be obsessed with immigration and highly unlikely to vote Lib Dem for other reasons.

A Liberal response is needed on re-emerging issues of online hate and harm, Labour's increasingly shameful record on a range of equality issues, and on the issue which will prove the most consequential of all; how to fix a structurally broken economy.

And we live in an era where the media establishment is captivated, captured even, by the far-right. Well-meaning liberals frequently whine about Kuennsberg and the BBC endlessly and disproportionately promoting riot leader Farage and his band of fascists.

They then moan about the Lib Dems not getting anything like the same level of coverage. They need to have a long, hard talk with themselves. First, we know the BBC was captured by the hard Right in the Johnson era. Second, the Lib Dem leadership and the poor excuse for a 'strategy' that got the party to its current position isn't going to get the same results just by hitting the repeat button.

People need to be doing things that get them noticed. When the BBC promotes hatred, it should be disrupted and called out. Until both those truths are acknowledged and addressed, however, those Lib Dems daft enough to waste time on the appalling Kuennsberg will find every Sunday is Groundhog Day.

Ultimately, whether Starmer does a Biden or not will depend on the economy. In a recent article about the revival of Lib Dem fortunes at the general election [<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-923X.13479?af=R>], academic Peter Sloman wrote that the party "forfeited its reputation for honesty and straight-talking and was squeezed by left/right polarisation over austerity" In 2010.

Rachel Reeves' politically inept doubling down on austerity reverses that polarisation. Concluding that what is needed now is to "flesh out a broader liberal response to the economic and political challenges facing post-Brexit Britain", he says: "In many ways, the Liberal Democrats are still living off the



intellectual capital of the Ashdown era: the debate spawned by The Orange Book generated more heat than light, and for much of the period since 2010 the party has been focussed on electoral survival.... It would be risky to assume that it will be similarly effective when the Labour government comes up for re-election.”

By the time of the next general election in 2028-29, which will largely be decided on whether Labour succeeds in reviving the economy, there is likely to be an open contest as to who will form the next Government. Such a contest will only be won by a party setting out a clear alternative prospectus, rather than a small number of themes highlighted in broad terms in a leaflet.

The campaign, too, will be very different. The party needs an answer to the question “Why is Britain broken?” that goes further than simply “Not The Tories”. A majority of British voters agree that it is indeed broken. Fundamental to answering the challenges of the time is being honest about why the country is so broke; spelling out the consequences of the Brexit folly on jobs, living standards and costs.

With no sign of economic recovery and as the long term impact of the 2016 catastrophe starts to be understood, the need to make the case for membership of the Customs Union and Single Market at the very least is self-evident. There has at least been a start made on this front.

On the domestic front, the party needs to find a way in which less well-off voters can feel it shares their values and concerns, without compromising its own beliefs. Some of this requires a focus on the issues that focus the minds of ordinary people; despite moments where it sought to suggest solutions to the cost of living crisis, there was little of substance to answer the obvious doorstep question: “so what would you do?”.

Labour’s lurch to the right abandoning progressive taxation of income or wealth offers another obvious opportunity; the shift in the private rental market to faceless ‘build to rent’ owners is yet another reminder that land values can and should be taxed.

## PIE IN THE SKY

Why we can’t get a GP or dentist was another frequently asked question. On dentistry there was at least a policy offer; had the party found itself trying to implement the pie in the sky ‘legal right’ to see a GP in Government, it would have found it impossible to deliver.

Solutions to the NHS crisis are needed, as well as to cuts in school funding and the issues of crumbling buildings that have been seen before with Labour governments adopting Tory spending plans. Issues of poverty, though, run deeper; child poverty is at record high levels, with shamefully few attempts to tackle it. The party adopted a policy of Universal Basic income (UBI) in 2020, the clearest possible anti-poverty measure; but this was never mentioned by the leadership who instead commissioned the Federal Policy Committee to water it down. It was sidelined in the general election manifesto; but campaigners

*“There are reasons why the party hasn’t successfully defended 70-plus seats in a century”*

in areas most affected will know that solutions are needed and need to be articulated.

This is one area where what is needed is not policy development but vision and relentless promotion of an idea. The party has made some headway with a focus on social care, although its vision or solution is less clearly articulated. Other

concerns, such as water pollution, are genuine but not visceral beyond the undoubted impact they have in the Thames Valley and Southern Water areas in particular. They may yet be subsumed by confirmation of Thames Water’s insolvency. They do not form part of a compelling and overarching narrative that applies a fundamental understanding of Liberal values to the problems faced by the world today. The party does not look prepared for an ‘Iraq moment’.

And there’s the rub. The 2024 election was for many people a simple case of “who do I vote for to get this lot out round here?”. Party discipline and tactical voting did the heavy lifting. They won’t be enough under a Labour government. However, there is a huge opportunity for a party to demonstrate fresh thinking and a different approach to the problems facing the country. The more tired Labour and the Tories look and the lower in the polls they both go, the bigger the opportunity. Set against this is the party’s sclerotic policy-making process. However, given the will to present a younger, fresher electoral pitch, the opportunity to make policymaking more flexible could easily be taken.

There is no sign that any of these changes or any fresh vision is likely to happen. The result will be simple. Without a clear assertion of what Liberal identity is, the news agenda will continue to be set by the far right. The disrupted local government election timescale will see gains not by community-minded Liberal Democrats, but by random independents and an alarming number of fascists. Were the English districts to elect in 2027, the result could be Lib Dem net losses and a degree of panic among MPs about the risk of losing their seats. Ironically Sir Edward may be spared the full impact of this; his saviour in the unlikely form of Angela Rayner. The underlying issue, however, remains.

If leadership and vision are not shown, the feelgood factor around much of Lib Dem-land won’t last amid the turmoil.

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Gareth Epps is a member of the Liberator Collective and a campaigner in Oxfordshire

# THE JIMMY CARTER I KNEW

President Carter's brief tenure in the White House was followed by a long career of humanitarian and political activity, recalls Rebecca Tinsley, who worked with him

Jimmy Carter was exhausting. So was his wife, Rosalynn. I observed them in action during election missions in Africa and at fundraising events. Neither appeared to sleep much, and both had the wiry build that comes from being in constant motion. They were united in their goal of ensuring the world remembered them for their achievements after the White House. They succeeded in that goal.

The Carters were exhausting because they never seemed to turn 'off'. If you had dinner with them, there was no idle chatter: as Queen Victoria is reputed to have said of Gladstone, they addressed you as if you were at a public meeting.

You were bombarded with a file of stories that illustrated the work of the Carter Center around the world, both human rights and health projects, and their observations about the challenges and triumphs they had encountered in their decades of work.

Their children and grandchildren got the same treatment. "What you saw in public was what we got in private," a grandson said.

## HEAVY SELL

Despite this heavy sell technique and constant self-promotion, Carter was shrewd when it came to persuading world leaders to allow the Carter Center to work in their countries. He allowed local politicians to take credit for the health programmes the Center ran on their patch. This could have a negative side, however: the Carter Center was so keen to access Sudan to eradicate the guinea worm disease, they turned a blind eye to the regime's record of slaughtering ethnic and religious minorities. I had a lively exchange with the president on this topic a month after I had been in Darfur at the height of the killing.

In 2003, my husband sent a modest donation to the Carter Center, their charitable foundation based in Atlanta, Georgia. Soon after, we were surprised to get an invitation to have dinner with Mrs Carter when she was passing through London, on her way to the charity's projects in Africa. We expected to find ourselves at a big event, sitting at a circular table at the back of a packed ballroom in a posh hotel in

Park Lane. Instead, there was only one other couple present in a private room in a hotel in Kensington.

By the end of the evening, my husband, Henry, was sitting on the radiator with the former first lady, drinking wine and gossiping. She asked us to set up the European branch of the Carter Centre, renowned for its work promoting democracy and running health programmes around the world. How could we refuse them?

Once we had registered the Carter Center as a charity in the UK, Henry and I were involved in organising a fundraising dinner in London. Days before the event, the president's staff (who had been with him since his time in the White House) warned us that the Carters were coming straight from Nigeria, where they had been overseeing their impressive medical projects, and that consequently they would be tired.

"You can have them for fifteen minutes only," we were told. "They'll circulate at the drinks thing before the dinner, but then they'll be gone."

We cautioned our guests in advance not to expect too much exposure to the great man and his equally remarkable wife. Yet, on the night itself, not only did the president chat to everyone in the room, but he stayed for dinner, and treated us to an off-the-cuff verbal tour of the global political scene.

Mrs Carter sat at one end of the table, with the president anchoring the other. Showing no interest in the food before him, he began talking as we embarked on our starter, and he was still on his feet when we reached coffee. The only interruption came



from Rosalynn, who kept interjecting with corrections and remarks. As she raised her voice, he would sink into his chair, and she would get up. Then, when she had finished, he would stand once more, resuming his comments. It was like watching a tennis match.

His aids looked on, resigned to yet another Carter family performance. Our guests were thrilled, and Marjorie Scardino, the high-powered US-born chief executive of Pearson group, concluded the evening in tears, telling the gathering that President

Carter restored her pride in being an American.

I went on election monitoring missions with the Carters on two occasions, in Mozambique in 2004 and Liberia the following year. On our first night in Maputo, the team gathered in a hotel conference room, where President Carter welcomed us, like a general rallying his troops before battle. Dressed casually in baseball cap, sneakers, and chinos, he was up-beat and buzzing with energy. Rail-thin and fragile at 81, he radiated Southern charm and good cheer.

Over the following week, his toothy grin and optimistic disposition never wavered, even as the power cuts, the dismal food, and the heat and humidity sapped the energy of all present. On polling day, President Carter was a veritable one-man customer complaints line. People around Maputo phoned him, reporting minor voting irregularities. Carter rushed to the offending polling station where he caused a scene, phoned Frelimo's presidential candidate, Armando Guebuza, and stayed on the phone with the wretched man until the irregularities were put right.

I recall President Carter sitting at a table at our headquarters hotel, a baseball hat on his head, and a plate of greasy French fries smothered in ketchup before him. His cell phone was glued to his ear, as he harried regional election officials to investigate reports of ballot queries.

## INTENSE FOCUS

He had applied the same intense focus when he was negotiating the Camp David agreement which brought peace between Egypt and Israel. His technique was simple: after each day's discussions, he would personally write up what points had been agreed and what details remained to be sorted out. He stayed on top of the talks, minute by minute, intervening when either side needed to be reassured or nudged forward.

After he left office, he was passionate in his commitment to eliminate guinea worm, a devastating water-borne disease that disabled three million people each year, before the Carter Centre set out to vanquish it from Africa. At the time of writing, there are now only seven cases annually. It will be only the second disease that has been completely eradicated, the first being small pox.

The Carter Center health programmes also tackle other neglected tropical diseases. I recall sitting in a London restaurant with Dr Gail Thomas who volunteered all over the world on her holidays, every

*“Rosalynn Carter asked us to set up the European branch of the Carter Centre. How could we refuse them?”*

time the president asked her to get on a plane. She showed me before and after photos of the effects of her surgery on men suffering with elephantiasis of the scrotum. I will treasure the expression on a young waiter's face when he caught sight of what we were examining with interest, concluding his customers were a couple of middle-aged female perverts.

A friend in Atlanta told me she and her husband would randomly

receive phone calls from the president, never via an assistant (“Pease hold for the 39th president of the United States”) but directly (“Carolyn, It's Jimmy Carter here”). Once you helped the Carter Center, you were never forgotten. Signed copies of his books and Christmas cards arrived each year. And Henry and I were astonished to receive an invitation to the president's funeral in Washington.

I will cherish a Carter rant I was privy to: over dinner one evening in Maputo, he held forth on all the ways in which George W Bush was not a Christian. Carter was raised Baptist, but he broke with the Southern Baptists because of their conservative views on African Americans and women. He knew his Bible inside out: following the teachings of Jesus informed his politics, his humanity and his desire for social justice. As long as his health allowed, Carter taught Sunday school each week in the Baptist church in Plains, the rural town where he and Mrs Carter lived after they left the White House. The first lady told me that when it came to voter registration, local officials made the citizens of Plains stand in two lines, one for each political party. She said that in the 1990s, she was the only white woman in the Democrat line.

I have a suspicion that the president chose the moment he would depart. I knew he was waiting for the last case of guinea worm to be eradicated in his lifetime. However, that was not to be. He was aware he would not get the send off he deserved with Trump in the White House. He also knew that protocol dictated that flags must fly at half-staff for 30 days after the death of a president, meaning that the Stars and Stripes would be at half mast during Trump's inauguration. The Donald is reputedly furious about this. President Carter's timing was perfect.

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Rebecca Tinsley is the founder of Waging Peace

# THE GREAT PR TRAP

## Lib Dems have for decades sought proportional representation but the greatest beneficiary could be Nigel Farage, says Sophie Layton

The 2024 general election is officially the most unrepresentative in UK political history, with the Labour party claiming two-thirds of the seats on a mere one-third vote share.

We know the First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) electoral system is unrepresentative, but 2024 has shown the urgency of changing the rules of the game, or else we will find ourselves in this position once again. And with Sarah Olney's surprise victory in the House of Commons in December, the prospect of achieving proportional representation is, although minor, slightly more possible than before.

I am more won over to the proportional representation (PR) system, with vote share directly correlating with seat share, with some reservations. But if we do truly embrace PR, we must accept that for at least one general election, the UK will undergo a painful transition, with Reform UK set to benefit greatly.

For the majority of Brits, caring about politics is very much an afterthought – and many people enter the ballot box as if they are entering a game of blackjack. Do they want to stick with the certainty of the party of government, or twist for a chance at 'winning big' with the opposition? Other parties, unfortunately like the Liberal Democrats, very rarely get a look in at many constituencies.

This model appears to be changing, yet not as we may hope. The Liberal Democrats achieved 72 seats in July, but the vote share was barely changed, merely consolidated as a result of tactical voting efforts. And Reform UK, winning only five seats, secured the third highest vote share - above the Liberal Democrats - largely due to dissatisfaction with Labour and the Conservatives. This is being seen in opinion polls, with the Tories back on top, Reform nipping at their heels, and the Liberal Democrats largely stagnant. Assuming dissatisfaction with Labour remains, and many are hesitant to go to Badenoch's 'reimagined' Conservatives, PR would likely present a grave challenge to many values we hold dear.

If a PR system was employed in 2024, Labour would have secured 219 seats, the Conservatives 154, Reform UK 93, and the Liberal Democrats 79. While proportionally fair, there are two very important factors to note here.

Firstly, the Liberal Democrats would have an extra seven seats only, an insignificant change. But for Reform, gaining an extra 88 seats would catapult it into third largest party. Picture Prime Minister's Questions every week – the resoundingly centrist Keir Starmer answering six questions from Kemi Badenoch on the Right, followed by two from Nigel Farage on the Far Right. The Left would barely get a word in edgeways.

So what can we do? Surely this cannot be reason enough to abandon the ideal electoral world of the United Kingdom with a PR system? There are several realities we must accept. Firstly, this is mere fantasy, at least for the foreseeable future. Starmer has already said, in response to Olney's bill, that it wouldn't be supported by his government, likely as this would deny his party an outright majority anytime soon, and will unlikely be pressured on this matter.

But should a PR system be employed for 2029, the Liberal Democrats would surely need to get their act together fast. The lack of a significant increase in vote share for the Liberal Democrats means a PR system isn't set to be a lucrative endeavour, more an achievement of principle, arguably a more noble cause. But if pursued, the real winners would be Reform UK. And we may be left with no alternative but to accept this outcome, at least for one election.

Many people don't engage with Parliamentary elections. Many more don't engage with parties other than the Conservatives and Labour. Many more than that don't engage enough to care about the system of calculating a winner. No matter the extent of campaigning, many will vote as they always have, or default to the Liberal Democrats or Reform if they cannot bring themselves to vote red or blue.

Reform UK would likely achieve a decisive growth from an unremarkable gaggle to a powerful cohort, and we would all have to bear the insufferable Farage on a front bench for the next term, a time that could realistically see Badenoch and Farage unite to kick out "the woke left" and "socialists" they see Starmer to be.

If we truly want PR in Parliamentary elections, we must concede to giving Reform UK some space to expand, at least in the short term. It may be a difficult truth to contend with, but until the Liberal Democrats, Greens and other left-of-Labour parties get their acts together and consider tentative alliances, a PR system will always favour those on the Right – until we change the narrative.

Will it allow Reform UK more influence? Yes. Will this be harmful? Certainly. But if we ever want to hope of a system that represents the people our current system claims to, it is a difficult deal and painful reality which we must be bold enough to accept.

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Sophie Layton is an international political communication student at the University of Sheffield

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**GOOSE AND GANDER**

*Dear Liberator,*

Some time ago the English Lib Dem party decided to make it mandatory for elected councillors on principal authorities to have to pay (tithe) a minimum 10% of their allowances to the party. Please note this is on an allowance, not pay, as councillors are not paid.

Whatever you think about this decision it has been made and council groups and local parties are left to collect and enforce this matter not without much grief.

So amazed was I to hear that a similar policy was not applied to our MPs (Liberator 426).

We need a clear and consistent policy within the Liberal Democrats, applying the same rules for MPs (and other elected representatives) to pay tithes to their local party.

Many of our MPs already pay their fair share and much more, but for the sake of clarity and fairness, this should not be left to personal discretion. If we demand this of our councillors, then it must be expected of our MPs as well.

What is good for the goose is good for the gander – I find it amazing and insulting to all those tithed councillors (and mayors) that this has still to be sorted.

All animals are equal but some are clearly more equal than others in the Liberal Democrats.

Howard Sykes

Leader, Oldham Liberal Democrats

Vice-president Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors

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**TRUMP AND THE TOXIC SWAMP**

*Dear Liberator,*

So now we know what Nick Clegg was up against at Meta. Not just appeasement of Donald Trump, days before the convicted felon was inaugurated for a second term as US president, but support for his twisted view of ‘mainstream discourse’.

That much became clear when his replacement as president of global affairs was announced as Clegg’s deputy, Joel Kaplan, the Republican who was White House deputy chief of staff to George W Bush from 2006 to 2009.

Given Trump’s threats to the billionaire tech bros of Silicon Valley, he was hardly likely to be happy for Clegg’s continued tenure after he had helped to set up the Facebook Oversight Board. It made key content moderation decisions that made the reputation of the social media site look good even as Elon Musk was dismantling moderation at Twitter.

Then came the decision by Mark Zuckerberg to dispense with third-party fact checkers – dismissed as biased because they were based in California – and adopt ‘community notes’ from users as introduced by Musk as he began turning Twitter into the toxic swamp that masquerades as free speech on X.

It was all designed, along with Meta’s \$1m donation to Trump’s inauguration fund, to curry favour with Trump, whose Facebook and Instagram accounts had been suspended on Clegg’s watch after his supporters invaded the Capitol on 6 January.

Is it any coincidence, by the way, that Netflix is currently heavily promoting on its UK streaming service Trump’s favourite ‘sport’, World Wrestling Entertainment, as a highlight of the new year.

As I write this, I’m aware of the media academic and Scott Trust board member Emily Bell’s latest piece for the Guardian website headlined: “Trump, Musk and Zuckerberg have declared war on facts and truth. The pushback must start now.”

Shame then, that the Observer will have to do that under new ownership this spring.

But I can remember once being chided by a British colleague working for the Guardian’s US website for suggesting as a London-based journalist that comment articles by far-right commentators from Fox News should carry an endnote explaining who they were as a form of health warning.

Especially, I argued, as there was no matching left wing or even liberal commentary appearing on Fox News. They were expressing ‘mainstream’ views in America, I was told. Look where that’s got us.

Paul Nettleton  
Carlisle

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**BBC BIAS**

*Dear Liberator,*

Since 4 November (the earliest date when the programme was available on its website when I started looking to find out the panel composition), there have been 96 panel members on the BBC Politics Live programme.

Of these, 31 have been Conservative MPs or former Conservative advisers, 24 Labour MPs, two Liberal Democrat MPs, one former Liberal Democrat adviser, four Reform/Brexit, one Green MP, one SNP MP, no Plaid Cymru, 19 journalists or others broadly left, 12 journalists or others broadly right, two where I’m not sure.

There have been six occasions when the panel has been effectively 50% Conservative representatives.

The BBC needs to look at this very closely. Why only two Liberal Democrat MPs when their number has risen from 11 to 72?

David Blake  
Lambeth

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**Unleashed**  
by Boris Johnson  
William Collins £30

What on earth possessed me? I have been spending the autumn very happily rereading Anthony Trollope's wonderful Barchester novels when I set aside the world of Archdeacon Grantly and the Duke of Omnium to pick up this door-stop of a book which is Boris Johnson's latest offering.

To start with, let us be clear what it is not: it is neither an autobiography nor a serious reflection on his time in office both as mayor of London or as prime minister in Downing Street. This is a pity since, following the devastating critique of his premiership in Anthony Seldon's *Johnson at 10* (Liberator 417), Johnson might have welcomed the chance to show that there was more to him than superficial populism, casual callousness and the carefully cultivated image of the happy-go-lucky buffoon.

But that's not his style. Instead, we have a book which reads as if it was dictated into a tape machine, transcribed and published without any editing, fact-checking or reflection. The colloquialisms and casual acquaintance with basic grammar result in a tabloid-esque style – there are hardly any paragraphs of greater length than a couple of sentences – demonstrating a lack of considered thought or analysis, and it is certainly hard to imagine other Tory premiers scattering the c-word through



# REVIEWS

their memoirs (although Harold Macmillan might have used such a turn of phrase in conversation or his diaries to describe Bob Boothby, I suppose).

This is a pity since Johnson can write well, and the sections on his handling of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and his strongly-felt commitment to the environment and the levelling-up agenda are both interesting and informative.

Less convincing is the sections on Brexit. Let us for a moment take his word for it – that his support for leaving was motivated by more than blatant political self-interest – it is still breathtaking that he took no responsibility for the lack of any plans as to how to handle a vote to leave and he fails to link May's failure to get a deal to the Leave campaign's failure to explain or plan for the implications of Brexit ("It was not our job" he proclaims).

Equally abysmal is his account of his handling of the Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe affair, trying to blame officials for failing to correct any "blunder" he might have made and taking a "shit happens" attitude before claiming credit for her eventual and belated release.

Johnson's unjustified taking of credit for things is almost as

major a feature of this book as the blaming of others for his own inadequacies and mistakes: nothing is his fault – the Partygate "hoo-ha" was a "miserable and wildly inflated affair" where he should have been "less naïve and less trusting". Has he not seen the photographs and videos, heard the views of the public or recognised that the only regret he has expressed was about being found out, not about the actual activity? He is still the same person about whom the Eton schoolmaster wrote that "[he is] an exception, one who should be free of the network of obligation which binds everyone else".

The style of the book, while readable, grates. Amid the casual sexism and racism (is it necessary to describe Federica Mogherini, the EU's foreign affairs representative as "fragrant" or to joke about there being more Frogs in London than Bordeaux) and the unnecessary classical references and Latin or Greek phrases – a kind of showing off to suggest that outward signs of knowledge demonstrate inner degrees of wisdom – there is a steady stream of half-truths, self-delusion and a rose-tinted revisionism.

Will Johnson ever return to British politics? After recent events in the US, nothing can be ruled out, although leaving journalism and the well-paid speaking circuit would be a blow to someone with his financial obligations, and he is still promising to deliver a book on Shakespeare and another on the twelfth-century poet and diplomat Usama ibn Munqidh. Those books, should they ever appear, will however need to be better researched than his error-strewn Churchill biography and better written, more accurate and less rambling than *Unleashed*, which is, frankly, of no use either to the serious student of recent political events or to those wanting to know about the real Boris Johnson.

Nick Winch



## Losing It: The Conservative Party and the 2024 General Election by Michael A Ashcroft Biteback Publishing, 2024 £10

There are two people inside Lord Ashcroft. One is Mr Hyde, who co-wrote what was intended to be a damaging biography of David Cameron. It contained a baseless story about a pig's head, which useful idiots among the online left, as Hyde had no doubt intended, spread far and wide.

But Losing It is written by the impartial psephologist Dr Jekyll. It contains the fruits of two large opinion polls Ashcroft funded just after last year's general election, and of 24 focus groups conducted with people who voted Conservative in 2019 but switched to another party in 2024.

Having studied all this data, Ashcroft puts forward three principal reasons for the Conservatives defeat: it's hard for any party to keep winning after 14 years in power; the coalition of voters Boris Johnson put together to win in 2019 was, like its architect, always likely to prove unstable; and the Conservative administration became - "to use a technical term from political science" - a total shambles.

It was this last point, he argues, that turned a likely defeat into a rout where the party lost half its vote and two-thirds of its MPs. The Conservatives forfeited the trust of voters because "senior Tories seemed to be playing out a soap opera for their own amusement, rather than tackling the country's mounting problems".

Ashcroft goes on to present the findings from his polls, interspersing the tables and charts with quotations from focus group participants. Liberal Democrat readers will find that someone voting for us in 2024 was most likely to be motivated by a wish to keep another party out (no wonder we can struggle under PR), and that the one factor on which we lead the other parties among voters as a whole is having our heart in the right place. This left me feeling at once pleased and a little patronised.

So we must thank Dr Jekyll for Losing It, even as we wonder what advantage Mr Hyde hopes its publication will bring in his internal Conservative Party politicking.

Jonathan Calder

## Serpents, Goats and Turkeys by David Laws Biteback 2024 £25

After two volumes of coalition diaries often scathing about his own colleagues inside Parliament, this tome is dubbed as a history of Lib-Labbery to 2019. Intriguingly, the author was allowed access to the unexpurgated version of Paddy Ashdown's diaries. The chapters dedicated to the Blair/Ashdown years don't give much particular insight into the attempts at policy alignment in 1998 that oversaw what later became the Tories' free schools policy; readers interested in the later dalliance with the Orange Book in collaboration with far-right hero Paul Marshall (and the symbolic shift culminating in 2010) at least get a belated acknowledgment that the book's purpose was indeed to move the party to the right.

However, this is David Laws' first real history book, covering Liberal history from 1900 with focus on points of Lib-Lab alignment. The waspish turns of phrase are rarer than in his diaries; historical narrative is the order of the day and it is in the most part engaging. The first account is of the 'Hospital Pact' between Herbert Gladstone and Ramsay Macdonald, with the potential impact of 'progressive' standasides set in focus.

Then as now, hindsight leads to debate over the wisdom of such a deal; it was certainly superfluous



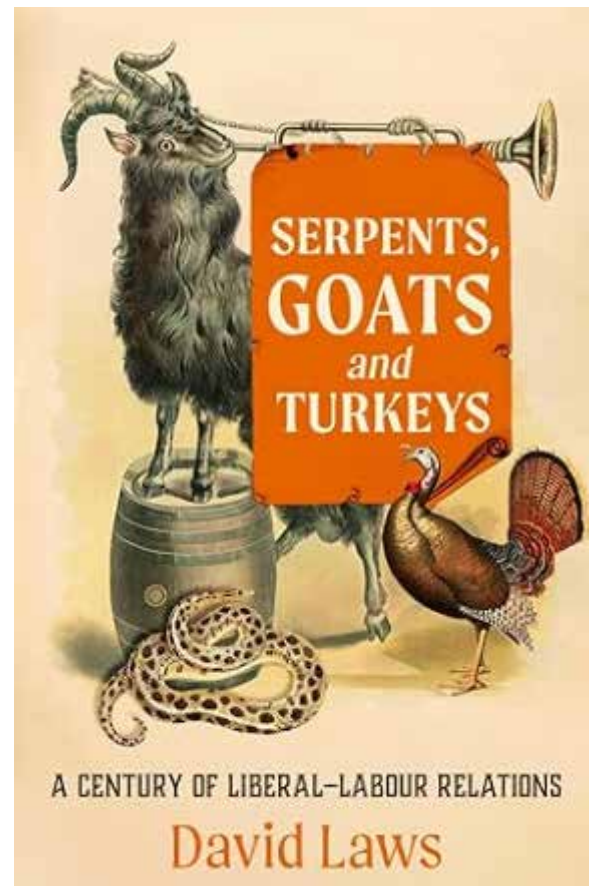
## losing it

The Conservative Party and the 2024 general election

Michael A. Ashcroft

in 1906. But when trade union donations to political parties were banned by the High Court in the run-up to the 1910 election, a marriage of convenience resulted in the 1911 Trade Union Act with no shared responsibility for the actions of Government, and had far-reaching consequences.

A partisan account of the ensuing implosion pulls no punches, but identifies the failure to record joint achievements and in particular electoral reform as fundamental to



what would follow.

Passing over the wilderness years, an opportunity is missed to cover the renewal of radical Liberal thought under Jo Grimond that did much to move the Liberal Party beyond the thin gruel of Tory pacts, while also repositioning it to the centre-left. Similarly, the party's revival isn't linked to the renewal of campaigning approach and vigour – a particularly curious omission. More compelling and enthusiastic are the accounts of David Steel's early overtures to Labour leading to the Lib-Lab Pact, the full horror of which is set out.

As might be expected, the Ashdown era is set out in full, but with detail not previously available. On equidistance being ditched on the (misplaced) trust that Blair would share power even given a majority, even Richard Holme was taken aback. Also notable was the former spy's success in keeping his negotiations secret to all but a small number of advisors, and the narrative – as so often – of a Liberal leader being strung along by Labour until they had no bargaining chips left. Those of us appalled at the time about what we knew was going on didn't know how far Labour wanted to subsume Liberal identity, though the occasional flash of Paddy's temper at the time showed how much he was keen to push coalition even against largescale opposition, culminating in MPs for Kingston, Taunton, Sheffield and elsewhere taking to the 1997 Glee Club stage to debut "The Lib-Lab Lie" with its crudely direct riposte to Blair, and by implication Ashdown.

Come the next year, Ashdown continued to seek coalition; perhaps the biggest revelation here was the effort made by party figures including, surprisingly, then campaigns director Chris Rennard to accept this and the Alternative Vote, almost certainly at a price that would have emasculated the party not long before 9/11 and Iraq changed its fortunes once more.

Blair was soon backpedalling again and Roy Jenkins' report on PR was destined to gather dust. Meanwhile, unreported in this book, the author as party policy director was overseeing an attempt at a wholesale policy review to trim the party's more radical instincts, making it more amenable to future convergence, and got mauled at

conference in the process.

The book alights at the Cameron-Clegg coalition, and the "hammer blow" of the spectacularly ill-judged AV referendum - subediting must have removed critical thought at this point - and its humiliating result. However, a final chapter and postscript reflecting on the current situation appears to reflect that luck, as much as anything else, describes the circumstances which have kept Lib-Labbery largely illusory for over a century.

Was it always a lie? And what about electoral reform? Perhaps naively, Liberals didn't seek to actively prioritise this when it mattered. It has never suited Labour, often seeming to prefer to spend the odd term in Government between lengthy periods of Tory rule rather than working with others. Will this come back to haunt Labour in 2029 as it did in 2010?

Laws' premise is that after occasional earlier dalliances resisted by Ramsay Macdonald, Labour undertook to never offer anything beyond the 'miserable little compromise' of AV. Laws appears to have been persuaded that it was a mistake to seek representation more proportional than that.

Gareth Epps

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## **What's next for the Liberal Democrats? by Mark Pack and Jim Williams**

This pamphlet begins a conversation as to the future – congratulatory from the 2024 general election but moving away from simple celebration to focus on retention and growth. And while doing a good job at conveying where we are and areas where we can move forwards, it is clear that it doesn't tell the full story.

The pamphlet analyses some of the results from 2024, explores where we may have opportunities for further gains and risks in future, as well as presenting a few possible scenarios (with an unhealthy dose of not entirely logical predictions), but largely structures itself around "the three legs of our electoral stool", which curiously has four parts.

Highlighting the importance of defending our seats, laying the

groundwork for more, offering a refuge for disillusioned Labour voters and growing local and devolved representation, it is clear that Williams and Pack have diagnosed a variety of key issues, and are establishing a way forward to address them.

But this misses some of the vital tenets of future success for significant and sustained progress. First, let's address the media issue. It lauds the Liberal Democrat media representation during the election – 100% agree. It celebrates that Sir Ed Davey is the most popular party leader – fantastic. But then we go on to, in my view, non-sensical praise of the media attention we're getting currently.

Sure, the Christmas song got headlines for a bit, but I challenge anyone to put on the news and find even a sliver of a mention of the Liberal Democrats. We may be the third party in Parliament but we're definitely not the third party in the media. If we genuinely want to progress further, that 'electoral stool' needs to not ignore the seat its legs are supporting.

We also need to stop assuming there's a pro-Liberal Democrat tide. The More in Common poll mentioned in the pamphlet puts 26% of our voters as doing so for tactical purposes, the second highest reason. In other words, a quarter of voters voted Liberal Democrat because "we're not the other guys", and this was in the climate of a hugely unpopular Conservative government who millions just wanted gone. Assuming that those 26% are here to stay is complacency. We need to focus on making the nation want to vote for us, and how we can get this message across.

Shifting opinion polls are clearly showing the Greens, Conservatives, Reform and the SNP are gaining, Labour is falling off a cliff edge, and us? Even in all this chaos, the Liberal Democrats are hovering where we always are. I welcome this pamphlet, I think it is measured, considered and a fantastic starting point for developing ourselves over the next few years, but there are significant omissions that we have got to start addressing, because currently, there's only one new party in reach of opposition, and it's not us.

Sophie Layton



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## **The Last Days of Liz Truss? [play] White Bear Theatre by Greg Wilkinson**

We will surely have to wait a long time to get another prime minister as bad at the job as Liz Truss, but how did she acquire the toxic mix of ideological fervour and economic ignorance that brought her down?

This play sees Emma Wilkinson Wright perform a monologue, interacting with voices off-stage, which come from Spitting Image's Steve Nallon giving his Margaret Thatcher vocal impression and voicing other characters (and indeed, Truss also interacts with a lettuce).

We see Truss developing from the child who said "shan't" to everything she disliked doing, to an adult consumed with ambition, to a prime minister in such a hurry to drive through her purported "growth" policy that she failed to notice it would collapse the pensions industry.

Wilkinson's script even neatly explains how the pension 'death loop' arose and how Truss crossed the line from mere patriotism to a fanatical belief that some special British entrepreneurialism existed that would burst forth if only she liberated it. As we now know, there was nothing there to hold back.

Wilkinson Wright's tour de force solo performance ends with Truss musing on the possibility of a come back after "18 months of Rishi, five years of Labour fucking it up, and five years of something really angry". It clearly implies that any Truss return would involve Nigel Farage. The precedents are against this. In post-war times only Harold Wilson in 1974 has made a come back as prime minister, and he was away less than four years and stayed as opposition leader, unlike Truss who lost her seat with her customary gracelessness.

The play presents Truss as a fallible person convinced she is doing good and doing the right thing but too blinkered by tunnel vision ideology and a quite unjustified self-confidence to listen to anyone who could warn her of the consequences of her approach.

There is also a hint that Truss's future may lie in America, whose consequent loss would surely be our gain.

Mark Smulian

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## **Patriot by Alexei Navalny Bodley Head, £25**

Navalny's posthumously published book is part prison diary, part political manifesto and part autobiography. But it is also a love story about Navalny's rock solid partnership with his wife. His openness about his feelings for Yulia run counter to the traditional Russian image of manhood, personified by Putin.

Navalny was a nerd who was uninterested in stripping off for the cameras to ride a horse or playing in hockey games in which professionals always allow Putin to score. Rather, Navalny was bookish, speaking several languages including human, which Russia's robotic president never mastered. Throughout the book, Navalny drops contemporary cultural references which would be a mystery to Putin, who can't use a computer and thinks the internet is a CIA plot. Navalny's humour and optimism are what make the book enjoyable as well as readable.

The lies perpetuated by the Soviet authorities about Chernobyl awakened the young Navalny to the corrupt and dishonest nature of the USSR. As he writes, nothing has changed since then: thieves and crooks control everything.

"How come in Russia almost all the young democrats, reformers and free market champions of the 1990s have become fabulously rich while changing their spots to become conservative pillars of the state? After all, nothing of that sort happened in Estonia, Hungary, Slovakia or Germany?"

Yeltsin was always part of the system, he says, so it was unsurprising to find his family has a \$15m home on St Barts. Navalny claims only Boris Nemtsov (murdered) and Yegor Gaidar were genuine reformers. The rest were opportunists who quickly dropped their idealism to cash in on the Putin kleptocracy. The narcotics police control Russia's drug trade, and state prosecutors are themselves criminals.

If this sounds familiar, there is plenty that is enlightening: most of the prison guards were polite to him and no one attacked him; prison authorities dutifully delivered his fan mail and thousands of Russians wrote to him; thousands more protested – contrary to the current

impression of a frightened, supine population.

He claims everyone (including him) bribes university teachers to give them good grades; and a third of deaths in Russia are attributable to alcohol. Gorbachev's reforms – which Navalny calls half-hearted – faltered because he stopped people consuming alcohol at weddings and celebrations, so everyone brought tea pots filled with vodka. The ridiculous and corrupt little former president Dmitry Medvedev owns Italian vineyards; Putin's people would threaten venue owners, making it impossible for Navalny to hold indoor events, so he would improvise, standing on cars in freezing weather to address crowds.

The only false note is when Navalny tries to whitewash his brief flirtation with the anti-Semitic nationalists, Russian March. Otherwise, the book is a fascinating picture of a country whose leaders have never trusted their people with the truth, fearing anarchy will result, and blaming outsiders when Russians dare to think for themselves. One is left wondering why Putin goes to the bother of pretending to have elections or the rule of law.

"Russians yearn for a normal life, fully aware that we have invented all our existing problems for ourselves. We cannot admit to being fools, though, so we look for something to boast about, where in fact there is nothing to be proud of," Navalny concludes.

He insisted on returning from Germany after Putin's goons failed to poison him because he felt he only had credibility as a politician if he was present. Russia has lost an incredibly brave and charismatic leader.

Rebecca Tinsley

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## **Nazi Billionaires by David de Jong William Collins**

The vast majority of the industrialists and bankers who bankrolled the Nazi Party from its early days emerged unscathed at the end of World War Two. They profited massively from the conflict and continued to be influential and wealthy in peacetime West Germany. Why? Because the Allies' attention swiftly turned to containing the USSR.

Nor have many of the thousands

who survived slave labour under the Third Reich ever been compensated. The victors were not concerned about obtaining justice for them. In fact, the American judges examining slave labour cases showed staggering ignorance, asking one survivor if she had enjoyed red wine with her meals. Only in this century was a body (Remembrance, Responsibility, Future or EVZ) established to pay compensation (from 3,500 to 7,000 Euros each) to the few who are still alive. Even now, the billionaires' heirs say they take responsibility without admitting legal liability. They have been more generous by ostentatiously funding Israeli museums.

Equally troubling, the Nazi billionaires' heirs – the Quandts of BMW, the Flicks of Daimler Benz, the von Finks of Alliance and Munich Re, the Porsche-Piechs of VW and Porsche, and the Oetkers of the German food empire - have largely avoided an honest accounting of their past. Only in 2021 did the Quandt family website mention their grandfather's crucial role in bankrolling Hitler: he was married to Magda Goebels before she hooked up with the Nazi propaganda minister. Quandt enthusiastically fired any Jewish staff, he used 57,500 slave labourers, many of who were worked to death, and he expanded his empire by acquiring Jewish business for a fraction of their value. Harald Quandt Holdings is now worth \$18bn.

De Jong argues that historical transparency should apply as much to Germany's wealthy families as it does to slave traders whose statuses are being pulled down. Some of Hitler's financial backers were true believers, but many told the Allies after the war that they had joined the Nazi Party or the SS because it was good for business – and these excuses were accepted. Apparently “the public didn't have the stomach for anti-capitalist show trials”.

Again, the Allies seemed uninterested in holding powerful conglomerates responsible for “Aryanising” companies belonging to Jews, either by stealing them outright or buying them for peanuts. Some of the worst offenders convinced the Allies of their innocence by providing “Persilscheins” or whitewashing

affidavits from friends that swore industrialists hadn't been anti-Semitic. Incredibly, the word of a cousin was accepted as proof of innocence. Evidence would mysteriously disappear, and Renault and Peugeot fought each other to hire true believer Ferdinand Porsche.

An interesting piece of trivia: Stalin tried to employ Porsche to oversee the Soviet car industry before the war, but Porsche turned down the job because he couldn't speak Russian. Another fun fact: only 630 of Hitler's dream car, the people's VW, were produced during the war, and they went to the Nazi elite, but talking about the car was good propaganda. After the war, Ferdinand Porsche took a 1% commission of every one of the 21 million VWs sold. Meanwhile, landmines made by Quandt's heirs are still claiming lives and limbs in Eritrea, Ethiopia and Angola. So much for justice.

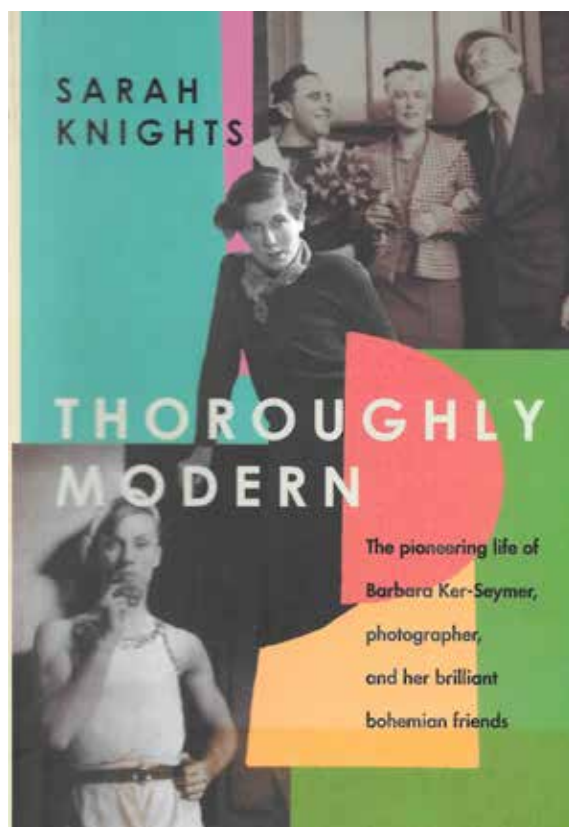
Rebecca Tinsley

## **Thoroughly Modern. The pioneering life of Barbara Ker-Seymer. Photographer, and her brilliant bohemian by Sarah Knights Virago 2023**

I first came across Barbara Ker-Seymer while wandering around the Tate (Britain of course) in 2014. There was a Seymer amongst Maldon Young Liberals, so I paid the small exhibition more attention than I might otherwise, and duly enlivened otherwise routine letters with the scant details available.

Sarah Knights' biography fills in the gaps, though much may be still out there. In many respects it is the probably platonic menage de trois between Ker-Seymer, Frederick Ashton and Edward Burra (and their assorted lovers) – high camp as you can imagine, through 1920s and 30s bohemia.

Bar progresses from flapper to photographer; known for her portraiture, (best known perhaps



for her Nancy Cunards) she also worked for Harper's Bazaar. She was a favourite of Jean Cocteau, and you don't get much more louche than that. Had more of her work survived or been attributable, she would be better known.

The war ended all of that, the ambience, the ability to run a photographic studio and most of her archive. Afterwards, she didn't go back, but opened one of London's first launderettes at 21 Tachbrook Street in Pimlico.

Joie de vivre notwithstanding, Bar was a hard-working and astute business woman, rebelling against the conventions of her time. The reviewer that drew my attention to Knights' book thought she was part of an unpleasant wastrel group of people, but I found otherwise, a generally liberal outlook on life, particularly in her concern for the declining Edward Burra in his later life. We all have our warts and might have done things better but look on the positive side of life. Here is a handbook of how to go against the grain.

Stewart Rayment

## Monday

For the past fortnight, the larger part of the car park at the Bonkers' Arms has, without my leave, been given over to an attraction calling itself 'Santa's Christmas Wonderland'. While there were queues on the first day, word has got about the village; this morning I find myself the only visitor. I suspected the hand of the Elves of Rockingham Forest when I first heard of the place: my suspicions are confirmed when I see the legend 'No Money Returned' prominently displayed and a couple of truculent elves on the gate. I make a beeline for the promised grotto, only to find a disgruntled Meadowcroft in a red suit and false beard (I'm certainly not paying to sit on his knee: as his employer I can do that any time I choose), while the advertised "elven childlings" turn out to be two Well-Behaved Orphans with their faces stained green. What Matron will have to say about that, goodness only knows. At least I am able to give Meadowcroft a breather by donning the scarlet tunic myself, though I am embarrassed when the Revd Hughes arrives on an unannounced ecumenical visit to the elves and recognises me behind the beard.

## Christmas Eve

To St Asquith's for the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols. I'm sure I speak for many when I say I do not regard Christmas as having properly begun until I hear the tremulous voice of a choirboy singing the opening verse of 'Lloyd George Knew My Father'. Late in the evening, a fellow in the Bonkers' Arms announces "Now they are all on their knees," referring to some legend that the oxen kneel in their stalls at midnight on this very day to welcome the Christ child. The Smithson & Greaves Northern Bitter has been flowing freely, and it does sound Rather Far Fetched, so bets are placed against. To ensure fair play, I join a party heading for Home Farm to see what the aforementioned beasts are up to. And – would you believe it? – they are kneeling. I have strong suspicions that the oxen were in on this from the start and will receive a share of the winnings, but say nothing, hoping it might be so.

## Christmas Day

This is what Christmas used to be like at the Hall! A long table simply groaning with good things and lined by friends, relations, staff, Liberal peers and MPs, members of Earl Russell's Big Band, resourceful orphans, elves and the like. Here, Daisy Cooper is discussing economic policy with the Wise Woman of Wing and the Professor of Hard Sums at the University of Rutland. There, the King of the Badgers discusses the finer points of guerilla warfare with Helen Maguire and Mike Martin. And everywhere, Freddie and Fiona are rushing out to make or take phone calls to prove how important they are – I strongly suspect them of phoning each other. I even spy, at the farthest end of the table, a couple of Conservatives who were MPs until the last election, but I pretend not to notice: it can't be easy finding a job with that on your curriculum v. And as a multitude of the heavenly host put it (and I think rightly): "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."

## Boxing Day

When I thank Cook for her sterling work yesterday, she expresses a wish that I will entertain the current

# Lord Bonkers' Diary

prime minister here one day so that she can meet him – "He used to be Director of Public Persecutions, you know." That pleasurable duty done, today is a day for talking with old friends – perhaps waving a cold turkey drumstick to emphasise a point – and strolls about my Estate. I take a party of new MPs to meet the Rutland Water Monster ('Ruttie' to her friends, among whom I am proud to number myself). Later, the more intrepid spirits leave for the legendary Boxing Night party at the Convent of Our Lady of the

Ballot Boxes.

I am dozing by my Library fire when the telephone is brought to me. "Hi, this is Danny Chambers. They found a frozen baby mammoth in Siberia and I've had it by my fire all Christmas, and given it a rub with a towel now and then. It's just given a tremendous sneeze, so all the signs are encouraging. I was wondering if you had a spare field where it could...." Politely but firmly, I replace the receiver.

## Friday

It's high time we had a proper BBC arse-booting; those Tory placemen (one of them is a former member of the Bee Gees, if you please) have been there long enough. I don't suppose you've had the pleasure of being present at this ceremony, where a bad hat who has evaded the stern eye of Sir John Reith and talked his way into the corporation, is ejected forthwith, but the way of it is this. The Chief Commissionaire, traditionally a former RSM from one of the Guards regiments, boots the miscreant the length of the longest corridor at Broadcasting House and out through the revolving doors. That corridor is lined with BBC luminaries, who tut and look disappointed in the bootee. You might spot, for instance, John Snagge, Grace Wyndham Goldie, Alvar Lidell, Franklin Engelmann, Katie Boyle, Moira Anderson, William Woollard, Angela Rippon, Lauren Laverne, Richard Osman, the Frazer Hayes Four, the more senior Telly Tubbies and several generations of Dimblebys in the throng.

## Saturday

Do you know the Zoom? It's a way of having meetings without taking the train to Town and, best of all, you can mute any speaker you wish. I have a morning meeting on it with Freddie and Fiona, who are already making plans for Ed Davey's stunts in the next general election campaign. I suggest, a little acidly, that, given our party's new-found enthusiasm for landowners, I have a word with the Duke of Buccleuch to see if there are any ditches he needs cleared out on his Northamptonshire estate. Getting into my stride, I mention that private schools are always looking out for someone to mark out the rugby field or clean boots. The pigeon pair are delighted with my ideas – at least they look delighted.

## Sunday

Back to St Asquith's. I make another attempt to interest the Revd Hughes in standing for Archbishop of C., emphasising the power and riches that would be at his command, but he remains adamant: "Get thee behind me, Santa."

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