

# liberator



- 🔥 Staring over cliff edges - Sarah Olney MP
- 🔥 Labour's social care charge sheet - Claire Tyler
- 🔥 Talking Ukraine with a former minister - Kiron Reid

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## LIBERATOR

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# COMMENTARY

## BLUE TURNS TO TURQUOISE

Reform's 677 seat haul in the 1 May elections was undeniably a shock to the party political system. Huge swings are familiar when governments get unpopular, but not on this scale and from a standing start.

It was noticeable that the Lib Dems and Reform to an extent kept out of each other's way with Reform made little headway in many places where the Lib Dems are strong and appearing to rely largely on disaffected Conservative voters switching to it.

Sooner or later though the Lib Dems and Reform will come into conflict if only from the startling speed with which the Conservatives are ceasing to be an effective election-fighting force in swathes of the country.

How then do Lib Dems fight Reform? Ed Davey has set up something called Reform Watch to try to do this - though little had been heard from it as Liberator went into production.

One way not to fight Reform is by trying to copy it. As the Tories and Labour are starting to discover, anyone who is willing to be panicked into copying Reform simply sees Reform make a more extreme appeal to its base. Other parties cannot win this sort of auction of 'toughness' on immigration, climate change, tax or anything else.

It's also important to grasp that Reform is a new kind of far-right enemy. This is not the British National Party or the National Front - neither of which would have felt the need to prominently feature non-white candidates and party officials - even if some voters may be the same.

Instead Reform justifies the description of 'populist' because it latches on to issues it simply believes to be popular.

Thus its policies are an incoherent and uncoded grab bag in which a basically Thatcherite free market party can suddenly discover an affection for nationalising steel and a dislike of the 'two children' rule.

Its leader Nigel Farage is not a fool - hence his downplaying of his close relationship with Donald Trump and admiration for Vladimir Putin - but he has set up his party in a way that makes its durability doubtful.

Reform is run as a limited company with none of the conventional rights and obligations normally extended to members by political parties.

If people join Reform they will expect to be able to influence what it says and does, stand for positions and shape its direction. That is simply not compatible with an organisation run by one person and will turn Reform into either a cult - as suggested by its defector MP Rupert Lowe - or a shambles in which the weirdoes and headbangers it attracts as activists fight to loosen Farage's grip.

Reform does contain plenty of seeds of its own destruction but that is not a reason to just wait.

As noted above, the Lib Dems did pretty well at keeping Reform out of their fiefdoms in the south, but can the party take on Reform in its fiefdoms? The effective Lib Dem presence in urban areas is largely limited to London and Hull, and old industrial areas have never been the party's strong point.

But Reform and the Lib Dems cannot go on for long without coming to blows in the same seats. So will the human and financial resources needed be planned for and deployed? Reform is unlikely to hold back from having a crack at Lib Dem areas after all.

## ENGAGE BRAIN FIRST

As an example of how to give gratuitous offence and get people's backs up, the row over changes to the Lib Dem candidate system takes some beating. This emerged in Tim Farron's general election review, which described the candidates system as "broken" even though it had delivered a full slate last July in even the most hopeless seats.

Liberator 428 noted that the party establishment used everything short of an animatronic Paddy Ashdown to get through the Harrogate conference a change to a centralised system run by staff rather than volunteers. The volunteers who had been running the system found themselves dismissed as amateurs.

The party establishment then affected pained surprise when the English Lib Dem Council failed to ratify the change as required. Scotland and Wales are yet to vote.

English Council members are now expected to be told they got it wrong and would they mind trying to vote again and get it right this time, an attitude likely to further stoke resentments.

Meanwhile, regional candidates chairs in charge under what is still the current system have said they will proceed with getting selections under way even though that system might suddenly change if England votes again.

The claim that having staff running the candidate system will of itself somehow bring forward lots more high quality candidates remains to say the least unexplained, and references to the role of donors have been left hanging further inflaming suspicions.

Changes to the candidate system might have gone through calmly with a bit more thought, but a combination of insults and overkill has prevented this.



# RADICAL BULLETIN

## MIXED MESSAGES

Holding a senior political post normally requires one to think clearly on one's feet, so it's a good idea before putting something controversial on Twitter to think very carefully, consider all the angles and then not do it.

Deputy Lib Dem leader Daisy Cooper could be found on Twitter parroting the Reform/ Tory line on the India trade deal by claiming its exemption from double national insurance for Indian workers was an outrage, when it in fact followed the model of every other trade ideal the UK has.

Cooper fulminated: "We Liberal Democrats are clear. We cannot vote for any trade deal that undercuts British workers in this way." She added: "This deal risks undercutting British workers at a time when they're already being hammered by Trump's trade war and Labour's misguided jobs tax."

At least in Cooper's case this nonsense was quickly deleted, not so the widely criticised statement from Lisa Smart, Liberal Democrat home affairs spokesperson.

After Kier Starmer's notorious 'land of strangers' anti-immigration speech all she could find to say was: "It's right that the government is taking steps to fix our broken immigration system to ensure it works for our country."

She went on to say: "However, this must be coupled with a clear plan to make it easier to recruit British workers to fill vacancies instead – including implementing our carer's minimum wage and speeding up reforms to the apprenticeship system – to ensure these changes don't have unintended consequences for our economy."

Not a word defending immigrants or the economic benefits of immigration, just a slightly toned down version of what the Tories were saying.

And this just days after Ed Davey announced the creation of a 'Reform Watch' unit in the party and said: "Are we worried about the rise of Reform. Of course we are. The question is, what's the best way to respond to that? And I don't think it's to copy them. I think it's to tackle them head on. From what I can see, we're the only party who seem to be up for that."

Davey was quite right - but have his lieutenants got the message?

## ENGLISH PATIENCE

Those who thought the overwhelming vote at Harrogate for the 'F10' reform to centralise the candidates process marked the end of the matter have had a distressing surprise.

This had to go to the three state parties for ratification and England has failed to do this.

English Council members voted to back F10 by 80 votes to 52 and so fell eight short of the required two-

thirds majority.

Ratification should have been a formality, but resentment at the insults directed by the party establishment at those who have operated the candidates machinery - coupled with suspicion that an HQ power grab was in progress - saw the change blocked.

Some council members complained they had been lobbied by phone by MPs' employees and party staff and were unimpressed by Lucy Nethsingha's explanation that these were simply individual party member promoting their personal views. If so, how had they obtained the phone numbers used?

Levels of mistrust were such that when a comfort break was called to count the vote, several voices accused the establishment of trying to rig it.

The following day, campaigns chief Dave McCobb emailed local parties in priority seats to say: "All Parliamentary Selections for the time being are definitively the responsibility of [regional candidates committees] and the English Party." It was unclear what period 'the time being' referred to. Scotland and Wales are still to vote.

The English regional candidates committees now propose to start selections under the existing system, even though a further meeting of the English Council may be called which would impose the different rules envisaged by F10.

All this will be happening without candidates officer Karen Colledge who resigned just before Harrogate after only five months in office, and was believed to be out of sympathy with F10.

Colledge told English Candidates Committee members: "I had been pondering it for a while but due to recent circumstances and actions, and an increasing uncertainty in the longevity of the role, I feel now is the time to move on."

## UNHAPPY RETURNS

The party also faced the prospect of operating the new candidates system without most of its returning officers.

They have historically in practice been indemnified by the party against being sued as a result of their decisions or actions during candidate selections.

While the common 'X versus reopen nominations' contest may pose few problems, there is an obvious risk that in a closely fought selection in a winnable seat a losing applicant may try to reverse the outcome through legal action.

HQ though shortly before spring conference sent a letter that said: "There is no insurance that will be provided to non-employees of the Party, to protect them from being personally sued."

This provoked the resignation of senior returning officer Bob Charlesworth followed by an English

Candidates Committee meeting where regional candidates chairs decided they could not appoint returning officers for any English selection until the lack of legal indemnity was resolved to their satisfaction.

Meanwhile in early April those hoping to appoint returning officers for major upcoming elections - such as regional elected mayors in 2026 - found most of the returning officers they expected to conduct these had withdrawn because of the indemnity issue.

In any event the party had decreed that returning officers needed refresher training, as do assistant returning officers wishing to progress to the full role, but that this training was on hold while the F10 rule change from Harrogate was implemented.

Such was the fury of the returning officers that chief executive Mike Dixon issued a message to clarify things, conceding "there does appear to be some confusion on this issue".

Dixon said: "For clarity, we have never had a blanket Federal Party (or State Party) indemnity insurance for volunteers in the candidates process. This has never existed, and is impossible to provide as no commercial insurer provides it.

"What the Federal Party has done in the past is support volunteers when they, or a process they ran as a volunteer for the party, have been challenged legally by other party members. Unless there is clear evidence of wilful negligence or malice on the part of the volunteer, we will - of course - continue to do this."

He said he hoped this would restore the returning officers to their normal roles, something that remains to be seen.

## TEARS OVER TIERS

Rows between Lib Dem affiliated organisations are rare but one broke out concerning the Parliamentary Candidates Association (PCA) and the Lib Dem Campaign for Race Equality (LDCRE).

PCA secretary Jill Hope circulated members about candidate selections and said: "We are aware that a number of BAME people are being encouraged to apply to become candidates. This may be under the heralded 'talent spotting' referred to in previous discussions.

"If this improves the diversity of our party, that is beneficial. However concerns have been voiced as to how approvals will be done under the new processes, and if they will be subject to the same approval process and due diligence checks our PCA members went through.

"The PCA would be strongly against having two categories of approved candidates, with considerable concern about potential reputational damage to the party if anyone is not thoroughly vetted."

Hope's reference to 'two tiers' infuriated LDCRE chair Rod Lynch, who told his members that the content of her message "does not represent me, I'm sure it does not represent you".

Lynch continued: "People like me have been pushing for equality in UK politics for years. Encouraging Black Asian and Culturally Diverse people to step forward and represent their community locally and nationally.

"In the [message] it talks about ethnic minority candidates in racist derogatory terms", he described Hope's message as a "two tier dog whistle briefing

[which] is not even good enough for tomorrow's chip paper because of its references to BME prospective candidates not facing the same due diligence as 'our PCA candidates'".

Lynch also asked for the PCA to be suspended as an affiliated organisation with its officers being compelled to resign.

Liberator understands the PCA's concerns to centre on what it believes to be Lynch's desire to recruit potential BME candidates and for their details to be forwarded to chief executive Mike Dixon without them paying for the normal approval process.

There is some dispute over whether this is what Lynch in fact meant, and it now appears the party has said all applicants must go through the same process. This is expected to see the PCA advice rewritten without the disputed words.

There are, separately from this row, fears in the PCA that the new candidates system will make it easy for major party donors - whether or not they are from ethnic minorities - to get themselves or their mates parachuted into winnable seats.

## BARE ESSENTIALS

Congratulations to new Lib Dem North Norfolk councillor Connor Rouse, who won the Holt ward by-election despite appearing on Channel 4's Naked Attraction in 2023.

Rouse was only the runner-up there, but won Holt despite his earlier bare-faced cheek. Clearly he got to the bottom of local issues without any cock-ups to become the new member.

Curiously, the success of the novel approach to raising one's profile has eluded compilers of ALDC's campaign recommendations.

## JUDGE AND JURY

Prominent Young Liberal James Bliss indulged deeply in the refreshments at the 2023 conference Glee Club, which led to him removing Darryl Smalley's shoe and throwing it, where it struck another attendee (Liberator 426).

He was ejected by hotel security and then banned from conference for a year by the Federal Conference Committee (FCC).

Bliss then appealed, which led to Federal Appeals Panel chair David Graham telling conference in 2024 that - deplorable as the incident was - FCC had exceeded its powers in banning Bliss.

In 2025, the FAP ruling has finally seen the light of day and it shows that when FCC banned Bliss it had before it a recommendation from chief steward Mike Ross that Bliss be excluded from two conferences.

The FAP said Ross did not believe he had the power to impose a ban alone, and the decision to exclude Bliss was taken by an ad hoc group of Ross, Susie Murray - the head of conference office - FCC chair Nick da Costa and FCC officers Cara Jenkinson and Jon Ball.

"This body of people was not provided for by the FCC's regulations or by the conference standing orders and had no power to impose exclusions", the FAP said.

It went on to note Bliss was not given a fair opportunity to make representations before the ban was imposed and "this was unfair".

The FAP ruling states that Bliss was not invited to attend the relevant meeting or sent a copy of Ross's report and nor was he given the identity of his

accusers or a summary of their evidence. He was not told who would be attending the FCC and given an opportunity to object.

FAP noted: "We were told that the purposes of the FCC in upholding the 2-conference ban were partly to deter future misconduct, partly punitive, partly 'to reform and rehabilitate the person who misbehaved' and to protect visitors to conference.

"The misbehaviour was considered sufficiently serious to warrant the ban, but not sufficiently serious to warrant a formal complaint via the Party's complaints process."

Bliss then appealed but FCC "followed a highly unfair appeals process". This was because the FCC "was constituted by numerous persons who had either been alleged victims or witnesses of the alleged misbehaviour (e.g. Darryl Smalley, Jennie Rigg), or informants (Nick Da Costa), or had actually made the very decision under appeal (Mssrs Da Costa, Ball, Ross and Ms Jenkinson)".

The FAP said: "In the circumstances, a reasonable fair-minded person would be entitled to believe that there was a real possibility that the appellate committee was biased in the sense of being a judge in their own cause, or having already decided the outcome of the 2nd October banning decision was correct. The persons involved did not recuse themselves and nor did they raise their previous involvement."

FCC members not previously involved in the affair "were not provided with sufficient evidence on which to judge the credibility of the different accounts", but only "the barest hearsay".

The FAP made a number of recommendations to improve the fairness of the exclusions procedure.

## WELSH RABBIT

Welsh Liberal Democrats have had a tough few years although they recaptured the Brecon and Radnor parliamentary seat last July.

An article on the Nation Cymru website from Simon Hobson announced at considerable length his departure from the party and his status as a former parliamentary candidate, and castigated the Welsh Lib Dems for being run by English retirees and older white men.

He also criticised them for failing to make wide enough use of the Welsh language saying: "The result of having a Welsh political party which speaks English with a Home Counties accent and neglects its duty to the Welsh language, is a party that fails to speak with either the urban south Walian valleys or, outside the English retirees, rural Wales."

And who might Simon Dobson be? The only Lib Dem of that name who stood at the last general election fought the well-known Welsh seat of West Devon and Torridge and was described in the local press as a "Barnstaple resident". From his pictures he looks male, white and middle aged.

## REASONS TO BE CHEERFUL

Those alarmed by Reform taking control of councils may draw some comfort from the only case of its predecessor Ukip exercising any local power.

Ukip in 2015 took control of Thanet with 33 seats. At the next election in 2019 it won zero although some of

its remnants surfaced as Thanet Independents.

Its time in power was marked by predictable splits and defections among the cranks and oddballs in its ranks and also by endless rows over reopening Manston airport.

This was particular obsession of Ukip's even though the only usable purpose of the former World War 2 base was to bomb Europe - a course that may have appealed to Ukip but had no economic viability.

## A BARONESS OVERBOARD

When the Equality and Human Rights Commission issued guidance in the wake of the Supreme Court ruling on the meaning of 'women' in equalities legislation some wondered whether its chair Baroness Falkner is still a Lib Dem peer.

She isn't, but not for any reason connected with equalities issues. In May 2017 (Liberator 384) Falkner defied the whip to vote with the Tories and Labour in the Lords against a second EU referendum, the policy promoted by then leader Tim Farron.

Farron duly responded by refusing to re-nominate her to the bureau of Liberal International, a post effectively in the leader's gift.

This outraged Falkner, who thought she could still hold the post despite breaking the whip on an important international issue, and she soon after retreated to the cross benches.

## GARDEN OF EARTHLY DELIGHTS

Compared with some of his stunts, attending a garden party seems quite conventional for Ed Davey, but few wanted to join him on the day after the local elections.

Party officials decided a photo-opportunity in Oxfordshire was needed for the media as the party was set to take control.

A garden party was arranged in Bicester and a breathless email was sent to members in the name of local MP Calum Miller, though it's unlikely he had much to do with it.

Problem was, the count was still going on for various Oxfordshire seats and the party was already stretched to find counting agents without having them peel off for tea and buns with Davey.

An imploring message said: "This would be our chance to share our local success with the national media. As this event would be broadcast live and be on the main news bulletins that evening, we need an enthusiastic large crowd there."

Even though a large and enthusiastic number of counting agents were even more needed, members were told "we can't hold it later and still make the bulletins",

## HOKEY COKEY

Fran Oborski and her late husband Mike were prominent pre-merger Liberals and then Liberal Democrats in Wyre Forest until internal disputes drove both of them to join the continuing Liberal party in 1996.

Increasing distress at that party's takeover by pro-Brexit headbangers led Fran to rejoin the Lib Dems in 2015.

She wrote in Liberator 372 that the most prominent cause of her anger was the Cornish Liberals

withdrawal of their parliamentary candidates in favour of Ukip.

It was therefore something of a surprise to find Oborski standing for Worcestershire county council in May as a Liberal Party candidate. She told *Liberator* she had left the local Lib Dems in a dispute over her deselection and the propriety of the process used. Her co-councillor Shazu Miah also joined the Liberals.

Oborski's 591 votes placed her well ahead of Lib Dem Nigel Grace on 226 but the split saw the seat go to Reform. The Liberal website listed only three other principal council candidates in the whole of England.

## RELIGIOUS FERVOUR

The Equality and Human Rights Commission has - after seven months of consideration - decided it will not accede to the Liberal Democrat Christian Forum's call for it to investigate the party over alleged religious discrimination.

This arises from the legal case pursued by David Campanale over his removal as parliamentary candidate for Sutton & Cheam last year.

Campanale claims he was removed in favour of Luke Taylor - now the seat's MP - as a result of religious discrimination against his Christian beliefs, a claim disputed by his opponents in the local party. Campanale was at one point leader of the Christian People's Alliance, a rival political party.

Correspondence from the commission states: "We have decided not to use our regulatory powers to commence an investigation into the Liberal Democrats and the specific concerns you have raised. However, we will raise the wider issue of potential religion or belief discrimination by political parties with the Electoral Commission, as part of our regular conversations with them."

This was not enough for forum chair Tony Price, who urged the commission to reopen the matter and said Campanale's "career and life have been badly damaged by this case".

Campanale's case is, for unknown reasons, due to be heard in Liverpool Crown Court, many miles from the scene of the dispute.

## BETTER LATE THAN NEVER

A mere 14 years after the Federal Appeals Panel began publishing an annual report, its English Lib Dems counterpart had finally done the same, though initially at least published only to the English executive.

It does not make for very enlightening reading. There were 11 cases extant at January 2024 and a further 13 were resubmitted that year. Of these 14 have been determined and the rest not for various reasons

One case anonymously described saw an appellant claim retaliation from their local party after making a discrimination claim. "There was found to be no basis for either complaint, not least due to the appellant focusing their evidence on the actions of staff of the local university, which is beyond the remit of this panel," it said.

## DELIVERERS' FRIEND

Lib Dem MPs were asked to propose subjects for 10 minute rule bills and South Devon's Carol Voaden came up with one that will be popular with anyone who has delivered leaflets.

In line with the lyrics of the Letter Boxes song from the *Liberator* Songbook, it would legislate for all homeowners to position a letter box on the boundary of their property and the road or pavement if the front door is located more than 25m from the pavement, or requires climbing more than 14 steps from the road.

Voaden said: "This bill would support Royal Mail and other postal services, particularly in rural areas, by making deliveries quicker and more efficient, thereby making postal rounds shorter and quicker. This would help maintain rural delivery and support existing daily deliveries.

"It would also make leaflet delivery easier for candidates. It would also create jobs in mailbox manufacturing."

This ought to gain support from Ed Davey as a previous Lib Dem administration in Kingston imposed a planning policy that requires new blocks of flats to have exterior ground floor letter boxes.

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# WHITEHALL DINOSAURS THREATEN STABILITY

## A walk on the Jurassic Coast reminds Sarah Olney that cliff edges in the benefits and VAT systems undermine personal security and small businesses

I was fortunate enough to spend some time over the Easter break in a part of the country which I think of as “between Edward Morello’s West Dorset and Richard Foord’s Honiton and Sidmouth”.

People who have a life beyond Liberal Democrat politics might better know it as the Jurassic Coast, a world heritage site famous for its rock formations and dramatic cliffs. The landscape offers some scenic walks, even if the weather is dreadful (which it was!), both on top and at the foot of the rocky cliffs formed over hundreds of millions of years, which are slowly yielding up the secrets of the past as they gradually erode.

Much as I was trying to take a break from the concerns of my constituents, the dramatic landscape caused me to think of one particular recent case.

Mrs M was in financial crisis. At the time that she contacted my team, she had not eaten for four days, she had no money in her bank account and her gas and electricity were about to run out. Thanks to the prompt work of my excellent caseworker, Mrs M received an emergency food delivery within 24 hours, had her gas reconnected and was in receipt of grants from a local neighbourhood charity.

My caseworker enquired a little further into the circumstances of Mrs M’s financial situation. It turned out that she had received an inflation uplift to her pension the previous year of £3.05 a week, but that this took her over the threshold at which she became eligible for pension credit. So this was immediately stopped, depriving Mrs M of £290 a month.

Worse still, as readers will know, the government changed the policy on winter fuel allowance, restricting it only to those pensioners who received pension credit. Having lost her entitlement to pension credit, Mrs M could now no longer receive winter fuel allowance. An inflation-linked uplift of £158 a year meant that Mrs M lost out on benefits of £3,668.

It’s worth saying that, when I raised this with the pensions minister, Torsten Bell, during work and pensions questions on 3 February, he challenged this interpretation of the case, telling me that the threshold would always rise in line with inflation. Having taken up his offer of a meeting, we subsequently discovered that an error had been made with Mrs M’s calculation. Mrs M has had her pension credit and winter fuel allowance restored, but at the time of writing, I am waiting for DWP to confirm how many other people may have been victims of the same error.)

### CLIFF EDGES

Mrs M’s experience is not unique. Our tax and benefits systems are littered with cliff edges, leaving many individuals disproportionately out of pocket because of small changes in their circumstances. Ed Davey has frequently highlighted the injustices experienced by those who claim carers’ allowance – a payment of £83.30 a week, payable to those who spend more than 35 hours a week caring for someone else. If they earn just £1 more than £196 per week, they lose all their entitlement to the allowance, and are expected to pay back anything that they may have over-claimed. The reality of life as a carer is that often the only work that can be fitted around caring responsibilities is short-term, zero-hours work, which increases the difficulty of keeping track of earnings. The particular conditions attached to carers allowance are poorly-designed for the circumstances of those who need to claim it.

Higher earners often face a cliff-edge when they start to earn more than £100,000, with the start of a tapered reduction in the personal allowance and the withdrawal of tax-free childcare.

The Centre for Policy Studies has estimated that a couple with two children in London would be better off earning less than £100,000 than they would earning any amount between £100,000 and £150,000.

It is also a well-recognised phenomenon that small businesses stop growing once their turnover nears the VAT registration threshold – currently £85,000. The costs and burdens of accounting for VAT, in addition to the necessity of increasing consumer prices by 20%, deters many entrepreneurs from growing their business any further, despite what opportunities might exist.

Cliff edges are hazardous. Not just for people out for a walk on a squally day, but also for individuals in receipt of benefits, or for people who want to increase their earnings or their business’s potential. And our economy suffers if people put limits on their ability to work or trade because they don’t want increased activity to end up costing them money.

How much could we boost growth by if we removed the disincentive for businesses to earn more than £85,000? How much better off would carers’ households be if they could earn whatever they were able to?

Eliminating cliff edges should be a priority for economic policy. They distort outcomes and restrain our choices.

The cliff edges of the Jurassic Coast emerged over hundreds of centuries; layers of sedimentary rock settling on top of the previous era’s geological remains. Our economic cliff edges have developed in a similar



way. New political priorities and policy choices have overlaid the foundations of our tax and benefit systems and have, in their turn, formed the basis of new policies. Short-term fixes to specific crises become embedded.

The winter fuel payment is instructive. First introduced in 1997 by Gordon Brown, it is a lump sum payment to pensioners to help with the cost of heating homes over winter. Even before Rachel Reeves brought in her means test, it was complicated. The payment was made at four different levels, depending on age and financial circumstances. It is also one of three separate schemes to help make heating homes affordable, alongside the warm homes discount (a £150 discount applied directly to bills) and cold weather payments (a one-off payment to low-income households if the temperature falls below zero for seven days in a row).

The means test that Rachel Reeves has introduced requires pensioners to be eligible for pension credit before they can claim winter fuel allowance. Qualifying for pension credit entitles you to a range of other benefits, such as free dental treatment, a free TV licence and help with your council tax. All these things disappear if you suddenly go over the threshold, as my constituent found to her very great cost.

Applying for pension credit is complicated, and keeping track of who is eligible, who isn't and what needs to be done to claw back benefits for those who have tipped over the threshold is expensive and bureaucratic. In their most recent accounts, DWP spent close to £10bn pounds on administrative costs.

An economic policy that prioritised eliminating cliff edges would have approached the winter fuel allowance issue in a different way. Instead of removing it entirely, the government could have chosen instead to transfer it to an equivalent increase in the state pension, ensuring that nobody would be worse off. This would have the effect of moving it from a tax-free lump sum to part of taxable income, increasing tax receipts back to the Treasury, but only from those who were earning enough to pay tax. It would have remained part of the state pension, regardless of whether someone was in receipt of pension credit or not, saving people like Mrs M from the risk of suddenly losing it, thanks to small changes in her income.

But more importantly, it would have reinforced the status of the state pension as a universal benefit, payable to everyone, rather than the situation that has developed, of the state picking and choosing who should receive handouts. The state pension should be maintained at a level that gives someone who can no longer work a basic income that they can live on. If more money is needed to meet the costs of heating a home over winter, then that should be added on to the state pension.

These were the founding principles of our modern welfare system, as espoused by Beveridge in his famous report. A basic standard of living "below which nobody should be allowed to fall" which formed part of the contract between the individual and the state. Crucially, Beveridge was opposed to means testing, as

*"The welfare state, as envisaged by Beveridge, was not just a series of payments made by the state to the poor. It was a whole society system"*

this would undermine the contributory principle – everybody pays, and everybody benefits.

If you stand on the Undercliff at Lyme Regis, watching your children attack the rocks and pebbles with hammers in the hope of revealing a fossil, you can't help but be aware of the

height and scale of the cliffs. And of the impossibility of scaling them. The etymology of the word 'cliff' derives from 'cleft' or 'cleave' – a cliff is a rupture in the landscape, dividing those at the top from those at the bottom.

## SENSE OF ALIENATION

It is interesting to note that opposition to the cuts in the winter fuel allowance have been cited as the reason why Labour performed so badly in the local elections this year. And that the petty populists of Reform have been the chief beneficiaries. Did Reeves' approach of undermining the universality of benefits paid in old-age help to feed that sense of alienation upon which Reform depend? There's no doubt that Reform are keen to encourage a sense that the ordinary hard-working people of Britain are being exploited by a liberal elite who want to keep shovelling their taxes towards the undeserving. Means testing benefits that were previously universal can only fuel that fire.

The welfare state, as envisaged by Beveridge, was not just a series of payments made by the state to the poor. It was a whole society system, and depended upon everybody's participation to function effectively. Even 80 years on from the election of the government that implemented the recommendations of the Beveridge Report, this is still how people expect the state to work – not just the benefits system, but all of our public services. The lesson of the 2025 local elections is that people want to feel that British society works for them and that their contribution is valued.

The cliff edges caused by means testing aren't just disastrous for individuals like Mrs M. They aren't just economically harmful in creating inefficiencies and distortions. They risk undermining the basic functioning of our society. They promote the division and insecurity which are being willingly exploited by populists who will use the opportunity to dismantle all the machinery of our welfare state. A strong society depends upon collective economic security, of giving and taking, and that the contributions of the individual towards the rest of society will be recognised and rewarded.

Scrapping the winter fuel allowance might have made economic sense on Rachel Reeves' spreadsheet, but the social and political cost threatens to outweigh the saving many times over.

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Sarah Olney is the Liberal Democrat MP for Richmond Park and the party's business and Cabinet Office spokesperson

# LABOUR'S BLIND SPOT ON SOCIAL CARE

Solutions to the social care crisis are well-known but always blocked by the Treasury. The government could grasp this nettle, but won't, and the charge sheet is long, says Claire Tyler

Shortly after the general election I led a debate in the House of Lords on social care. At that point it seemed possible that Labour might do something about it. Since then we have had an endless series of disappointments and cans being kicked down the road.

In that debate I made a number of general points about social care which too often get overlooked. They explain why doing something on social care is such an imperative.

Firstly, social care is a hugely valuable public service in its own right, at its best allowing millions of our fellow citizens to live independent and fulfilling lives, and improve their wellbeing and that of their family carers – it is not simply an adjunct to the NHS.

Yes, fixing social care will help the NHS address its current problems, and help enable two of the three big shifts articulated by the prime minister in response to last September's Darzi Review – moving from hospital to community and integrating health and social care. But bailing out the NHS is not, I contend, its primary purpose.

Secondly, the social care market makes a significant contribution to local

economies. Skills for Care estimate that the sector contributes £50.3bn to the English economy.

Thirdly, social care isn't all about older people (important as they are) or preventing people from having to sell their properties to pay for care as the debate is too often so unhelpfully characterised.

Support for working age adults and lifelong disabled adults, particularly people with learning disabilities, has become the largest area of spend in adult social care, and is growing faster than any other part of adult social care.

## DELIVERY FAILURE

In short, we need to frame the debate in a different way - valuing the sector as a contributor to economic activity, as fundamental to providing a health and wellbeing offer to people in their local communities and contributing to the preventative agenda that the NHS on its own has, according to Lord Darzi, failed to deliver. Despite all the very real problems, there

is some good and innovative practice at local level, often involving integrated neighbourhood working between social care, community health services and the voluntary sector.

With good reason social care has been described as the biggest public policy failure of our time. The past 25 years have seen six government and independent commissions, seven green and white papers, 14 parliamentary committee reports and innumerable other reports on social care policy. These reports have identified policy options to address many of the problems in social care. Time and again commitments have been made but then reneged on. Three attempts

have been made to introduce an alternative system. Each time this has failed due to lack of funding and or political will. Andrew Dilnot's proposed reforms received royal assent not once but twice, but still have not been implemented.

There is wide consensus that things cannot carry on as they are. With an ageing population and a growing number of disabled people of working age needing care, demand is increasing but funding is not keeping pace. In reality, publicly funded care is available only to those with the highest needs and lowest means and the quality

*"In reality, publicly funded care is available only to those with the highest needs and lowest means and the quality is highly variable"*

is highly variable.

A new Oxford University study, reveals that care failings are far more common in for-profit care homes looking after state funded residents, whereas for-profit care homes with better off self funded residents are more likely to receive good or outstanding Care Quality Commission (CQC) ratings. In short, state funded residents are being badly let down.

Recent analysis from Age UK has found that more than 2.0m older people are now living with some unmet need for social care. Healthwatch has estimated that up to 1.5m working age disabled people could be missing out on social care they are eligible for.

Persistent underfunding of local government in the last decade means some councils now spend as much as 80% of their budget on care for adults and children. Public satisfaction with social care is at a staggeringly low 13% according to the latest Social Attitude survey.

What has the Government's response been? The charge sheet is as follows:

- ☛ The Kings Speech was silent on social care other than introducing a Fair Pay Agreement for social care staff as part of the Employment Rights Bill. As the Kings Fund commented: “Unless that increase in pay is matched by commensurate increases in local government funding, it will further squeeze already strained care providers and local council budgets”.
- ☛ Last July Rachel Reeves announced that she was scrapping the changes to social care charging planned by the previous Government – essentially the second attempt at implementing the Dilnot reforms which would have introduced an upper cap on the amount someone has to pay for care (whether at home or in a care home) and introducing a more generous threshold for receiving local authority support.
- ☛ Last October’s Budget raised employer National Insurance Contributions to 15%. While there were exemptions for public sector employers such as the NHS, there were no exemptions for independent social care providers adding some £940m to their wage bill compared to the paltry £600m allocated to the social care Budget in 2025-26. These increases were described as “catastrophic” by the president of the Association of Directors of Adult Social Care. Despite valiant efforts in the Lords - lead by Lib Dem peers - to exempt social care from the hike in employer NICs during the passage of the Bill, these amendments were subsequently overturned when the Bill went back to the Commons.
- ☛ A small scale package of short term measures was announced at the start of January injecting £86m into current year spending – frankly a drop in the ocean - as well as the setting up of the Casey Commission with a three year timescale and an interim report next year. The ultimate goal, according to Wes Streeting would be the creation of a National Care Service as touted in Labour’s 2024 manifesto, details of which were scant. Essentially the announcement kicked any fundamental reform into the long grass making it a ‘second parliament’ issue – should there be such a thing.
- ☛ Most independent commentators thought the timescale far too long. Paul Johnson of the Institute for Fiscal Studies said: “You might think that a government with a huge majority and access to all those previous reviews might actually decide to do something rather than set up yet another review”. He added “Casey’s biggest challenge is not going to be getting agreement on what needs doing, it’s going to be getting agreement on how to fund it. Yet if history is anything to go by the Treasury will not let her near that crucial question.”
- ☛ Within two weeks Louise Casey had been appointed to head up a three month national review of grooming gangs for Home Secretary Yvette Cooper, pushing back the start of the social care commission. Was there really no-one else who could head up the grooming gangs review leaving Casey to at least make a start on social care?

- ☛ Arguably most egregious of all, Labour’s recent Immigration White Paper, with no prior warning, brings to an end international recruitment to social care roles – something that has effectively propped up the social care workforce for years. In 2023 more than 58,000 overseas care workers came to the UK on skilled worker visas – nearly half of all new entrants to the social care workforce. Responding, Professor Martin Green, chief executive of Care UK said the Government was “kicking us while we’re already down. For years the sector has been propping itself up with dwindling resources, rising costs and mounting vacancies. International recruitment wasn’t a silver bullet, but it was a lifeline”.

The White Paper had precious little to say on how the Government intended to support adult social care after these changes – specifically where the money to pay higher wages for British staff would come from.

## BROKEN SYSTEM

At heart, the Government simply isn’t prepared to find the money needed to fix a broken system – it’s always far too low down their priority list. An interesting new take on this came from the Health and Social Care Select Committee’s recent report Adult social care reform: The cost of inaction, which concluded that the Casey commission reforms were doomed to fail, unless the Government measured the true cost of inaction on social care. It pointed out that :

- ☛ continuing to do nothing on social care is an active decision, and an untenable one;
- ☛ the Government won’t be able to make a successful case for social care reform without knowing the true cost of doing nothing;
- ☛ the economy is missing out on the sector’s potential to drive growth;
- ☛ the broken social care system depends on army of unpaid carers providing care equivalent to a second NHS;
- ☛ social care is consuming increasing proportion of councils’ budgets, crowding out spending on other services.

The Committee is chaired by Lib Dem MP Layla Moran who said: “We all know the crisis in social care damages lives and the economy. It’s the Treasury we must convince.”

This was also the conclusion of a recent event held by the Kings Fund whose speakers included Andrew Dilnot and former deputy prime minister Damien Green. The bottom line was that reform would only ever happen if the PM was personally prepared to back it and take on the Treasury’s reluctance and antipathy towards social care.

In the short term there is much that could and should be done to improve workforce status and pay. It doesn’t need to wait for the long overdue fundamental reform to the system.

Social care is a job requiring skill, insight, compassion and commitment, but this is not recognised in the terms and conditions on offer. Front line roles typically attracted only £11 an hour in March last



year - 58p higher than the National Living Wage at that time and with no progression prospects. More than 80% of jobs in the economy pay more than social care. So it's scarcely surprising that employers find it hard to attract and retain people already resident here in the UK. If you do a similar role in the NHS you are paid appreciably more.

We need a Social Care Workforce Plan sitting alongside the NHS workforce plan with equivalent Government commitment to implement its recommendations. Social care needs a formal career structure - along with training and development to help people advance in their careers and be appropriately rewarded for doing so. Liberal Democrats have also been calling for a Royal College of Care Workers to improve recognition and career progression and a higher Carers Minimum Wage.

Alongside this we need a new National Carers Strategy which includes paid carer's leave and a statutory guarantee of regular respite breaks, as well as increasing Carers Allowance, expanding eligibility to it and bringing to an end the overpayments scandal.

## TRANSFORM LIVES

At heart many people don't know what social care is. We need to talk much more about it affects people's everyday lives. Social care has the potential to transform lives and we need to use much more clever and direct language.

The lesson from countries that have successfully grasped the nettle of modernising social care is the need to have a reasonably honest conversation with the public about the options for funding it.

In Japan policy makers had identified the strong need for more people in the workforce overall. Social care was portrayed as allowing more women to participate in the workforce. This is likely to be language that the Treasury can understand. In



Australia a new model is being introduced - basically a version of social care that we have legislated for twice but never implemented (Dilnot) - following a nationwide campaign.

This national conversation is something the Casey Commission could make progress on but it doesn't need to take three years. We urgently need cross party talks looking at the realistic options for sustainable, long term funding, to lessen to risk of a successor government undoing decisions made.

We are not starting from scratch - the main policy options are well known and costed. Respected independent commentators such as the Health Foundation have set out them out and estimated their costs. The Nuffield Trust has called for a rapid diagnostic exercise similar to the Darzi NHS review

which took three months not three years.

At heart, the basic issue is how much the state pays and how much the individual pays. Strong political will and courage will be needed – indeed the sort of courage that went with the creation of the National Health System in 1948 in the face of stiff opposition.

Last September Wes Streeting said in an interview with the New Statesman: “If I look on my time in this office not having grasped the nettle of social care reform I will have considered by time here a failure and I am not prepared to fail”. Will these words come back to haunt him?



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Claire Tyler is a Liberal Democrat peer and a member of the Health and Social Care Team



# UKRAINE, GAZA AND THE UK'S ROLE

## Will Forster MP has visited Ukraine, Gaza and Israel and calls for medical help for the former and support for peace seekers in the Middle East

In my first year as Woking's Member of Parliament I've been lucky enough to go on some hugely insightful trips in recent months, first to Ukraine, and then to Israel and Palestine and want to share my reflections.

I visited Ukraine over Parliament's February recess as part of a cross-party delegation of British MPs following an invite from UK Friends of Ukraine because of my previous vocal support for the war-torn nation.

Our visit coincided with the third anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion. In Kyiv, I stood behind Volodymyr Zelensky and other world leaders at the national commemoration, where I was proud to pay my respects on behalf of Woking by placing a candle.

The determination of the Ukrainian people is unquestionable. However, one of my biggest takeaways from the trip was how much more we can do to support them, as well as how much we can learn from them.

The stories of personal courage are remarkable. Ordinary civilians before the war, now fighting out of sheer pride in their nation. Soldiers, some of whom had lost limbs, were determined to return to the front and defend Ukraine – supporting this effort is an area where I believe we can do far more.

Medical aid for Ukraine could save a huge number of lives and help address manpower issues. A quarter of all battlefield deaths could be prevented by better access to blood supplies at this pivotal moment.

This is an enormous number. By increasing blood supplies the UK can play a vital role in minimising unnecessary casualties in Ukraine – but it's not just blood. I met with one soldier, Volodymyr, who lost his leg in combat. At first, he endured unbearable pain, but now, he is focused on one goal – to secure a prosthetic leg so he can rejoin his unit. If Britain can step up and work with our Ukrainian partners to provide the prosthetics amputees need, many will be able to return to the fight.

More supplies are urgently needed, especially for civilians. Hygiene products are in short supply, adult diapers being the most requested item. The evacuation of care homes has left many vulnerable, with fewer carers available to support them.

Humanitarian aid must step up to meet the growing need and this, I believe, is something the UK should take the lead on.

The second of my trips over recess was to Israel and Palestine, where I saw first-hand the destruction of Gaza and the dire situation for Palestinians in the West Bank. I also visited the Nova festival site – the location of some of the deadliest attacks carried out

by Hamas on 7 October 2023 where 364 people were killed.

I visited Israel and Palestine because I wanted to understand more about the conflict. I wanted to push for peace, and I wanted to see how both myself and the UK can help to achieve this.

Unfortunately, as I saw and heard for myself, speaking to individuals on both sides of the conflict I understand just how difficult it is going to be to achieve this. The collapse of the ceasefire and recent statements from the Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, on the plans to capture the whole of Gaza have filled me with dread.

Israel's land grab strategy is clear – taking the land but not the people.

I know that as a Liberal Democrat, my party is both on the right side of the argument and history on this heartbreaking conflict. We condemn Hamas and their appalling attacks on 7 October, but also condemn the Israeli Government's actions in Palestine - especially Gaza - which according to the international courts could be found to be genocide.

We urgently need an immediate bilateral ceasefire to put a stop to the humanitarian devastation in Gaza, get the hostages home and open the door to a two-state solution. I am proud to say that the Lib Dems were the first party to begin calling for this.

As recently as late 2024, my friend and colleague, Layla Moran MP proposed a bill calling for the immediate recognition of the state of Palestine on the 1967 borders. This, I believe, is the first step towards achieving a lasting peace.

Despite the horror that I saw and heard, there is still cause for hope. Arab countries and European nations are working together to push for peace - and I believe the solution is via regional security. Very few Israelis support a two-state solution now according to opinion polls, but they overwhelmingly want regional security - and would back a two-state solution alongside regional security.

So many Israelis and Palestinians are working together for peace. I met former IDF soldiers in Breaking the Silence who are calling for accountability, human rights and a two-state solution, showing that change is possible from within.

Palestinian rights and Israeli security are not contrary to each other. In fact, one is not possible without the other. If a country or individual is committed to Israel's security, it should be doing all it can to protect Palestinian rights.

# HOW TO HELP UKRAINE HELP ITSELF

Kiron Reid talks about innovation under fire with Kostiantyn Koshelenko, who recently stepped down as deputy minister for digital development in Ukraine's Ministry of Social Policy after three years

**Q KR: Why did Ukraine prioritise digital transformation of social services during a full-scale war?**

**A KK:** *When the full-scale invasion began, it disrupted not only cities and supply chains but the very systems people depended on to survive. The question wasn't "Why digitalise now?"—it was "How else can we deliver aid fast, safely, and fairly when the state itself is under attack?"*

*As deputy minister, I led the creation of the Unified Information System of the Social Sphere—a digital backbone that integrated over 200 types of social services across national and local government.*

*We launched platforms like eDopomoga, through which millions of people received cash assistance, including cooperation with UN agencies and international donors.*

*We brought social services into the Diia app together with the Ministry of Digital Transformation, ensured online applications even during power outages, and dramatically reduced bureaucratic delays. We also launched dity.gov.ua to streamline child protection services and case management.*

*But the bigger story is this: wartime exposed the moral value of efficiency. When lives are on the line, slow is unjust. Digital transformation wasn't just a policy. It was a duty.*

**Q KR: You've recently published a book titled *Management in Times of War*. What drove you to write it, and what has the response been?**

**A KK:** *The book began as a personal discipline - a way to make sense of what I was witnessing and doing. But very quickly I realised that I wasn't alone. All across Ukraine, people were leading teams, projects, businesses under fire. And no one had a map. We were all improvising in real time. I wanted to capture that. *Management in Times of War* is not just a book. It's a testimony. It's a toolbox. It's a collection of lived experiences from 40 frontline managers, civil servants, entrepreneurs, and soldiers from across Ukraine*

*- and contributors from 11 countries. It is about how to lead through breakdowns, chaos, and uncertainty. And though born in Ukraine, this knowledge is relevant to anyone leading during turbulence, anywhere.*

*The reception has been humbling. The book was recently released in Swedish. Two Finnish publishers expressed interest. It's available worldwide via Amazon, and the UK is among the top three countries by purchases. I believe that people everywhere are looking for leadership models born out of real adversity, not just theory. And Ukraine, sadly, has become a crucible for such models.*

**Q KR: What is everyday life like in Kyiv for you and your family?**

**A KK:** *Life in Kyiv today is a paradox of war-time normalcy. On the surface, cafés are open, the subway runs, children go to school. But there's a constant subtext: the air raid alerts, the shelter routines, the news from the front. During alerts, children attend class from school bomb shelters. At night, we often lie awake as Shahed drones fly above us, or rockets strike somewhere in the city. It's not the kind of life anyone chooses - but it's the life we shape with choice.*

*My wife and I have adapted. We cherish small things more - morning walks with our dog, a quiet dinner with electricity on. The rhythm of life is different, but so is its emotional weight. We're not paralysed by fear, but shaped by purpose. Every act of resilience is our answer to those who want us broken.*

*And through all this, Ukrainian businesses keep working. We meet our deadlines. We deliver services. We build products. We honour our contracts - and we welcome international partners. That's what real credibility looks like.*

**Q KR: Zaporizhzhia, your hometown, lies close to the current front. What is the atmosphere like there?**

**A KK:** *Zaporizhzhia is resilient. Always has been. This is a city with steel in its spine - industrial, proud, and now incredibly united. People there*

*know what's at stake. They are only 30 kilometres from the occupied zone. But they are not afraid. They are organising, volunteering, producing, and rebuilding. Multiple underground schools have been built to protect children. But the city is under constant threat and frequently attacked.*

*My parents still live there. So do many friends. Their message is simple: this is our land, and we're not giving it up.*

*But Zaporizhzhia doesn't need pity, it needs partnership. One example: the tech company Uinno, founded by people from Zaporizhzhia, now works globally, building advanced solutions in AI, fintech, HRM, and medtech. That's the kind of cooperation we need more of.*



**Q KR: You've worked with international partners, NGOs, and tech communities. What should Ukraine's allies do right now to make a meaningful difference?**

**A KK:** *First, continue military and financial support, that is obvious. But just as critical is investing in our digital capacity. Ukraine is a tech-savvy country. Our engineers and developers are world-class. Many are building cutting-edge AI and cybersecurity solutions under war pressure that rival Silicon Valley output. My call to readers, especially in the UK: if you're working on digital services, AI, or platform development — partner with Ukrainian talent. You'll be surprised by the results. We don't just write code. We solve existential problems.*

**Q KR: How do you respond to claims of corruption in Ukraine?**

**A KK:** *It would be dishonest to pretend it never existed. But it would also be unfair to ignore how far we've come. Digitalisation has radically reduced opportunities for petty corruption. Services are automated. Records are public. Platforms like Diia make it impossible to bribe your way to a shortcut.*

*Of course, challenges remain. But we've moved from denial to action, and we've built the tools to hold ourselves accountable. Ukraine's transparency reforms should be seen not as a weak spot, but as a success story in progress.*

**Q KR: And what about the constant Russian narrative about Nazis in Ukraine?**

**A KK:** *It's both laughable and dangerous. Ukraine is a multi-ethnic, democratic state. Our president is Jewish. Our parliament is pluralistic. The only fascist aggression we face comes from across our border.*

*This lie persists because it is convenient. It makes invasion sound righteous. But the world should no longer waste energy debating it. Look at Ukrainian cities, full of people defending democracy, not ideology. That's the truth.*

**Q KR: Is there anything you'd like to say directly to British readers?**

**A KK:** *Yes. First, thank you. The support from the UK - politically, militarily, emotionally - has mattered. We feel it. Second, please keep engaging with Ukraine not just as a country at war, but as a country of ideas, people, and potential. Buy our books.*

*Hire our developers. Share our stories. We're rebuilding while still under fire. That takes more than courage, it takes partnership.*

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Kiron Reid is a member of the Liberator Collective



# IN SEARCH OF THEIR MOTIVES

Don't fall into the trap of thinking the Reform surge came from working class voters - more factors are at work including a collapse in Conservative values, says Jonathan Calder

Why did Reform UK do so well in the local elections? How should parties respond to their rise? Who exactly is voting for them?

Some would tell you to wait for the academics to crunch the numbers, but if you go to the research on how and why Leave won the 2016 European Union referendum then you find, as so often the case in academia, not a body of agreed conclusions but a loose bundle of continuing debates.

So rather than wait for a consensus that may never emerge, I'm going to do what I can here to clear what seem to me widespread misconceptions about Reform and their voters.

To begin with, the success of Reform should not shock or even surprise us. Ukip polled more than any other party in the 2014 elections to the European parliament, receiving 26.6% of the vote and electing 24 of the UK's 73 MEPs. Five years later, the Brexit Party did even better, electing 29 MEPs and receiving 30.5% of the vote, slightly more than Reform UK won in this year's local elections.

These three successes were achieved by Nigel Farage under three different party names, which reminds us that the far right has always been prepared to form parties, break them up and form new ones until they hit upon an arrangement that attracts voters. It also reminds us that Farage has been key to their successes, but we should have grasped years ago that there is no reason to expect us to be immune to the rise of the far right that has taken place across Western Europe in recent years.

## NEW NORMAL

Despite leaving the EU, Britain now finds itself with a thoroughly European party system that includes a substantial party that stands to the right of the Conservative Party. This may well be the new normal.

After the EU referendum, Leave's victory was widely attributed to a desire for revenge by left-behind areas. This narrative had its appeal to some on the left, because you could argue that it made the disastrous outcome of that vote all George Osborne's fault, but I was never convinced.

It seemed rooted in a dated, even nostalgic, view of the working class as white, male and engaged until recently in heavy industry. Yes, big changes have taken place in working class employment, but they took place some decades ago. The Full Monty and Brassed Off came out in the mid-1990s, and both were looking back on a transformation that had already taken place.

Yet a disaffected working-class was the first explanation many reached for to account for Reform's successes on 1 May. Liberal Democrat Voice, for

instance, immediately ran an article that argued Reform is "hoovering up votes across the country by doing one simple thing: articulating the grievances of the working classes".

It was good to see an article on that blog which talked about inequality and social class, but I don't buy its thesis that Reform's vote came solely from an aggrieved working class. Even in Durham, where Reform swept away a previously solid Labour majority, the figures show that it won a large slice of the votes that previously went to Conservatives and Independents as well as taking votes from Labour.

What I found most striking about the local elections was the collapse of Tory Midland England. Staffordshire, Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire all fell to Reform, while Leicestershire now has a minority Reform administration. Even amid the Liberal Democrat triumph in Shropshire, Reform won enough seats to become the largest opposition group on the new council. While all these shires contain areas of widespread poverty and areas of Labour strength, it was the Conservative Party that took a hammering.

It seems to me that the Reform vote is best regarded as a protest vote – a concept we Liberals should be very much at home with, because we depended upon such a vote for survival and occasional upturns for decades.

The late, great David Penhaligon was given to suggesting that a 'Stuff Em All Party' would do well at the polls, and that is how Reform is seen by many voters, which is perhaps something we miss in our anxiety to condemn Nigel Farage's views on race or the latest member found to have once espoused Fascist views on social media.

Whether you blame the economic situation it inherited or its lack of ambition, this Labour government is proving a sore disappointment to many who voted for it, while the thoughts of habitual Conservative voters can only be imagined. They now find themselves with a leader who is older than Tony Blair or David Cameron was when they came to power, yet comes over as a spiteful child. The majority of her MPs, meanwhile, hesitate to remove her for fear of who the party's membership might land them with next.

So you can see why there's now a ready market for the Stuff Em All Party. Meanwhile, we Lib Dems can choose between being disappointed that our concentration in the affluent south means we are no longer viewed in that light, and taking this as a sign we are beginning to have a more coherent policy profile with voters.



Having managed to fake authenticity, Nigel Farage has made himself a better media performer than either Keir Starmer or Kemi Badenoch. It's not so much that he comes over as being more fun to go for a drink with: it's more that you can't imagine the other two going for a drink at all. Added to that, now and then Farage does show political nous – he resisted the temptation to court Elon Musk and his money by embracing Tommy Robinson, sensing that one of his weaknesses is that he is already seen as too close to Trump and Putin.

In a thoughtful piece for Compass, Olly Glover, the Lib Dem MP for Didcot & Wantage, wrote of it becoming “increasingly common to encounter voters who are open about their intention to vote Reform. A surprising number of these were choosing between Reform and Lib Dem.”

He continued: “Voters’ reasons for considering Reform are more varied than might be assumed, with scepticism about net zero and climate change commitments now as common as concerns about immigration.

“Uniting them all is widespread cynicism and loss of confidence in the entire political system and the British state. This aspect is shared with many non-Reform voters too, but Reform have captured the bulk of the ‘anti-establishment’ sentiment.”

And Dr Nathan Ley, a Lib Dem councillor from Abingdon, has written on his Substack that Reform is now: “The repository for some voters who are angry, dispossessed, downtrodden, as well as lots of people who are actually quite comfortable with their life, but feeling just a bit bored.”

Labour is pinning its hopes on recovering these disaffected votes simply by governing better and producing visible improvements by the next election. This ambition does not seem to extend much beyond the NHS: elsewhere the government is continuing the austerity its members devoted 14 years of their lives to condemning.

I wish Labour well in this endeavour, but they are going to have to find better communicators to put their case across. If Keir Starmer or Rachel Reeves gave a fireside chat, you fear the fire would go out.

It's hard to know what to advise the Conservatives to do. The most significant voting pattern of the 2016 referendum has always seemed to me the way that great swathes of prosperous southern England voted Leave. You can blame David Cameron – if a prime minister puts a choice to voters in a referendum, they are entitled to assume that both paths are reasonable ones for the country to take – and I wouldn't discount Dr Ley's observation that voters were a bit bored.

But what happened to all those southern Tories with a fat stake in the status quo and a determination to keep things pretty much as they are?

*“We should have grasped years ago that there is no reason to expect us to be immune to the rise of the far right that has taken place across western Europe in recent years”*

I would look to the disappearance of responsible clerical and middle-management positions to technology and cost-cutting, and to the difficulty most people now experience in getting on the property ladder.

David Boyle wrote a book about these trends, *Broke: Who Killed the Middle Classes?*, back in 2014.

Beyond this, there has been a collapse in Conservative values to such an extent that it's possible to argue that the Conservative Party's fundamental problem is that it's no longer Conservative. It was said of Margaret Thatcher that she hoped her policies would produce more men like her father, but she ended up producing more men like her

son.

## SNOBbish VIEW

And for Liberal Democrats? We should be wary of habits that it is too easy to learn online. One reason I distrust the argument that Reform is winning on working-class votes alone is that it plays into a snobbish view of the working class held by some people who imagine themselves to be left wing. The working class, they believe, is, like anyone who disagrees with them, stupid.

Such people write about, say, Lincolnshire as though they were Victorian explorers or missionaries, complete with a party of native bearers carrying their aspidistra and upright piano, but instead of cleft sticks to send messages, they use smartphones. They paint the county as impoverished, sexist, racist and any other ist you care to mention. This view is backed up by some small-town boys who praise themselves for having escaped it.

Yet Lincolnshire voted in line with the rest of the country in the 1975 referendum on continued membership of the European Economic Community – two-to-one in favour. And, years after that, Liberal candidates piled up huge votes in coming second in constituencies like Gainsborough & Horncastle and East Lindsey. In the latter, which is largely the Boston & Skegness constituency now represented by Richard Tice, the deputy leader of Reform, the Liberal Alliance polled over 20,000 votes at the 1987 general election.

Politics is rarely as simple as online debate makes it appear.

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Jonathan Calder is a member of the Liberator Collective

# NOT SURE WE SAW THAT COMING

Reform took 677 seats from nothing in May, despite the Liberal Democrats' successes then, do we face a once-in-a-generation political change, wonders Chris White

We always knew that Labour was going to have difficulties in the local elections. Incumbent governments lose support over time, although the speed and determination with which this Government has alienated its base has surprised us all.

Likewise the Conservatives have seen no revival nor any sign of one. There are no new policies and the leader, in post almost accidentally because of the unaddressed flaws in the party's internal election system, is not cutting the mustard.

The contrast between the two parties, however, is marked. Labour was given a difficult hand which it should have played better. The decision to cancel winter fuel payments in isolation from a general budget statement is a breathtaking combination of communication and fiscal failure. The cash could simply have been added to the pension ("Look at us making it permanent!") where it would be taxed on those pensioners who pay income tax, including at higher rates for those with hefty pensions.

## TERRIBLE MISTAKE

Its toxicity cannot be underestimated. One Cabinet minister has said: "Winter fuel will lose us the next election. It was a terrible mistake."

But it was the harbinger of worse: increases in employer national insurance, affecting jobs and potentially pay, proposals to cut sickness benefits, and even the extension of inheritance tax to farms.

It takes a particular talent to make farmers popular: most voters are indifferent, many hostile. But the 'family farm tax' is an easy and evocative slogan, even if loudly promoted by Jeremy Clarkson, who had been open about the fact that his interest in farming derived from inheritance tax avoidance.

It is too early to tell why these policy failures are happening but theories abound. The hatchet job Get In, instant history from journalists Maguire and Pogrund, suggests that Starmer has distinct limitations as a politician and is prone to make bad decisions when left to himself – like appointing Sue Gray to a post unsuited to her talents. Only Morgan McSweeney (the backroom mastermind who intriguingly emerges as the hero of the book) can save the day for the new leadership.

Others point to Rachel Reeves, often with unattractive sexism and snobbery (exemplified by the cheap jibe of 'Rachel from accounts'). She must, however, take the blame for the winter fuel payments fiasco. Likewise, the negative impact of national insurance rises on councils, the voluntary sector and small businesses must surely outweigh the fiscal take.

The rise, coupled with the massive lowering of the threshold, will not promote growth.

It would also appear that the Treasury and DEFRA did no impact assessment of the introduction of inheritance tax on small farms. And just to make it clear that the Government is entirely clueless about agriculture, the secretary of state paused farming payments.

The Government is clearly suffering from a competence issue even before you look at its inability to communicate.

These have been positives, of course, but these are mainly international. Yet even those positives have been marred: offending the Canadians (and the King, for all we know) with the embarrassing offer of a state visit to the fascistic president of the United States, while failing for so long to get on with bankable deals with the EU, hardly inspire the heartland.

The Conservatives were always going to struggle. Recently bereaved political parties find it difficult to shine. New policies take time to work up and are anyway risky when you are years away from a general election. But the long shadow of Liz Truss stifles the prospect of a political revival.

There are further factors. Councillors are the backbone of political activities, providing funds, muscle and local leadership. Conservative numbers were already diminishing before 1 May. In 2022 they held 6,756 seats. This had fallen to 4,862 by 2024, although they were still (and are) a major player. They have also been losing donors to Reform UK, which raised £4.75m in 2024, one-third of which came from former Conservative donors.

The perception of the results on 1 May were distorted by the decision of the Government to dust off plans for regionalisation and reorganisation which means that there were no elections in Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex, Thurrock, East Sussex, West Sussex, Hampshire, Isle of Wight and Surrey. Some of these are among the largest authorities in the country. Some may well have provided additional good Liberal Democrat results (especially East Sussex, Hampshire and Surrey but quite probably more).

We should therefore remember that most of England was not voting at all, especially the conurbations including London.

Professor John Curtice was clear before polling day. He told the Independent: "Fewer than half of the people who tell pollsters how they are going to vote say they are going to vote either Conservative or Labour. It has never been quite that low before."

He also pointed out that the Liberal Democrats would do well in certain areas and noted that the party was

standing candidates in 99% of seats up for election.

The Tories had done well in 2021 because of vaccinations and were therefore defending a high base. This would be difficult for them.

Interestingly Reform UK were difficult to see while canvassing. They were most notable in terms of expertly

targeting postal voters, using a national drop which was clearly expensive: it will be interesting to see who paid for this. It is clear that they picked up votes from Tories and Labour as an alternative protest vote to the Lib Dems.

Reform undoubtedly did best in the council elections with 677 seats (up 677). The Liberal Democrats were second with 370 (up 163). The Conservatives third with 319 (down 674) and Labour fourth with 98 (down 187). First-past-the-post did its usual trick of distorting the results in favour of a rising political force.

This morphed into a three-horse race in most media, including even the Guardian's front page. The three parties in most media outlets were Reform, the Conservatives and Labour.

Whichever way you cut it, however, the headline should have been Reform-Lib Dem-Conservative and 'the Lib Dems came second'. The Liberal Democrats took three counties completely (Oxfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Shropshire) and produced excellent results in Devon, Cornwall, Gloucestershire, Hertfordshire and Wiltshire.

It is understandable that Reform's sensational win, both in terms of the local elections and the parliamentary by-election, should be the principal headline but the exclusion of the Lib Dems raises questions again about impartiality, especially not for the first time on the BBC.

Some would argue that the BBC has been acting as a cheerleader for Reform on key programmes. While Question Time is surprisingly balanced in terms of politicians (although Farage has appeared more than nearly anyone) the media personalities have tended overwhelmingly to be right wingers. There are similar questions about Laura Kuenssberg, although Reform itself is among those expressing fury.

The current overall councillor reality in England shows Reform in fourth place: Labour 5,610; Conservative 4,824; Liberal Democrats 2,909; Reform 798, Green 757.

But equally in opinion polls Reform is often nowadays top of the poll. Something is in the wind.

In some ways it is more important to ask who lost. Labour clearly lost at least as badly as the Tories in seat terms and in 81 divisions there were no Labour candidates.

In my own area of St Albans, Labour came fifth overall with 6.5% of the vote. In 2005 the St Albans constituency still had a Labour MP..

In Stevenage, a classic Labour new town, all the seats went to Reform, including that until recently held by the current local government minister Baroness Taylor, except for the one held by the Liberal

*"They may wonder whether further the local government reorganisation is worth the candle given that it may yet deliver even more Reform UK councils"*

Democrats.

Reform took votes more or less equally across the country from the Tory and Labour parties but posed very little problem for the Liberal Democrats:

Lib Dem and Green Party wards and divisions are populated heavily by university graduates who are least likely to vote Reform. Significantly, Reform's lowest vote at 3.7% was in Parks division in Oxford. In demographically similar St

Albans Central it was 7.9%. Both divisions were won by the Greens, however.

## **ASTONISHING AND SHAMEFUL**

The worst thing one can do in the face of electoral challenge is to panic. Which seems to be precisely what Starmer did.

In an astonishing and shameful speech on 12 May he attacked migration, claiming, with breathtaking cynicism and economic illiteracy, that migration was economically harmful (reversing his position in opposition) and appearing to echo Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech. Care workers were dismissed as 'cheap foreign labour' by a man giving the impression that he has never visited a care home nor understood its economics.

As Jonty Bloom graphically said in the New European: "Even if Yvette Cooper arranged to be filmed machine-gunning small boats in the Channel, Reform would just scoff and say if elected, they would use a bigger gun."

Polls show that he has zero chance of outflanking Reform UK. A recent post-election YouGov poll indicates that Starmer's ratings from Labour supporters are -5 (down 34 points). Among Reform voters they are -94 (down a further 5).

Labour may try to shore things up by having another look at winter fuel payments, but they have made fresh enemies of anyone who has a relative currently in a care home or who may in the future go into a care home.

They may wonder whether further the local government reorganisation is worth the candle given that it may yet deliver even more Reform UK councils.

Labour could sit it out and hope that Reform will make a mess of things. Resignations from among the unexpectedly elected have been amusing although hardly an avalanche. Poor decision-making and the reality that this and previous governments have bankrupted councils and removed their room for manoeuvre may well generate headlines from hapless and inexperienced councillors. But it is hardly a strategy.

Providing better government is likely to be the best answer. But what we know about this government is competence is not its strong point.

It may go away: these were elections in some but not all of England. But there is no guarantee that urban England, or Wales or Scotland will be immune to what may well be a once in a generation political change.

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Chris White was a county councillor in Hertfordshire for 32 years and is currently the chair of East of England Liberal Democrats



# FROM THE FORGOTTEN LAND

Just four of 72 Liberal Democrat MPs are in the north and council representation is patchy. Samuel James Jackson reports on plans to put this right

At the 2024 general election, the Liberal Democrats successfully got 72 MPs elected, the greatest number achieved since the merger of the Liberals and the Social Democrats in 1988. With our leader Ed Davey being entitled to ask two questions at Prime Minister's Questions and our MPs afforded greater media attention, we have been able to more effectively argue the case for our policies. And with members of our parties having greater presences on select committees including as the chairs of three, we are better able to scrutinise the Government and hold them to account. This is part of why there is growing interest in our party.

To overcome the grossly distorting first-past-the-post voting system to win a fair share of seats owed to us by our 12.2% national vote share, we had to undertake a ruthlessly focused campaign. Relying heavily on tactical voting and public discontent with the Conservatives' mismanagement and rightward shift, we targeted and successfully flipped Blue Wall seats primarily in southern England.

## HUGE IMBALANCE

Because of this, there is now a huge geographic imbalance within the Westminster party weighted towards southern England, as 82% of our MPs represent constituencies in either Greater London, the south west, south east or the East of England.

By contrast, there are only four Liberal Democrat MPs throughout the north of England. While Tim Farron, Lisa Smart and Tom Morrison collectively represent our party in north west England, Tom Gordon is our sole MP in Yorkshire and the Humber and has represented our party in north east England as a guest conference speaker as we have no MPs in the region.

This was achieved within the wider framework of our focused campaign targeting Conservative seats. The three seats that we gained in the North – Harrogate and Knaresborough, Cheadle and Hazel Grove – share some similarities with southern 'blue wall' seats, such as being predominantly rural, being centred on historic market towns or having largely middle-class, professional electorates.

With such an imbalance, there is the risk that our Westminster party will gear itself towards southern England and fail to consider the needs and concerns of a region of the UK that has long felt left behind and ignored.

Failing to learn how we can appeal to northern voters will leave our party without room for growth, running

the risk of significant losses at the next general election.

At 2025 Spring Conference, held in Harrogate, Yorkshire and the Humber Liberal Democrats organised the fringe event Increasing the Liberal Democrats' Northern Appeal. Its purpose was to share and discuss ideas about how the Liberal Democrats could better appeal to northern voters, and to highlight this need to the federal party.

As our by-election successes prior to 2024 were translated from earlier gains in local elections, our panel comprised senior Liberal Democrat councillors from communities throughout the north rural and urban, and Conservative- or Labour-leaning. They were: Mike Ross, leader of Hull City Council and candidate in the Hull and East Yorkshire mayoral election; Tim Pickstone: group leader on Cumberland Council and chief executive of the Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors; Amanda Hopgood: then leader of Durham County Council as head of a rainbow coalition; Paul Heilbron: group leader on Salford Council and campaign organiser for Lisa Smart.

Each panellist outlined to a full room what they believed were the most important points to consider in campaigning as northern Liberal Democrats.

Hopgood said that campaigning in the north is difficult as a Liberal Democrat and that the national party cannot rely on certain parts of the country in maintaining its current strength.

Liberal Democrats must be something to everyone and inclusive while staying true to our policies and beliefs, and a viable alternative to Labour and the Conservatives in contrast to the unknown factor of Reform UK.

For individual candidates, she said that personality was key and they must serve as community campaigners, with her still volunteering at pensioners' lunches hosted by her local church.

Pickstone said that election victories and losses are how scores are kept, highlighting the Liberal Democrats' successes in Windermere, Hull and Durham, and that year-round campaigning was necessary to maintain a commitment to local communities.

We should not be afraid to learn and ask for help, and we can show each other how we can win elections from what we have learnt from 50 years' experience. He said that local parties should endeavour to stand candidates everywhere and that it is imperative that no other party be afforded the chance to win, thus allowing us to lay the groundwork for successive victories in formerly target wards.

Heilbron outlined his insight as a young(ish)



councillor. By explaining our policies, namely those concerning Europe and the environment, we could persuade progressive 18-to-30-year-old voters to electorally support us. We are obliged to provide a home for these voters, who had voted Labour out of habit and been alienated by their recent spending cuts and means-testing of benefits.

Ross, describing his mother's work as a local councillor and his campaigning efforts in the 1990s, spoke about his experiences as a councillor in Hull. The people of

Hull have different interests and to build a coalition of voters, it is vital to go out and speak with them. Campaigning with community activists helped us overcome a devastating 11-councillor loss in 2011 in reaction to the Coalition.

Answering questions from the audience, Ross said that the Liberal Democrats had a high bar to clear and that we needed to "eat the elephant one bite at a time". We need to accept that we are in a difficult position. And Hopgood said that she represents the largest ward in County Durham and that it is possible to develop large, sparsely populated wards, particularly with the aid of marked registers.

Heilbron said that while voters are generally not interested in politics, they do care about issues, whether it is electoral reform or the environment. Rather than reciting policy papers chapter and verse, it is important explain our policies in bite-size chunks. And Ross said that for northern Liberal Democrats to discuss serious issues, we need to convey fun in our campaigning, emulating Ed Davey's campaign stunt strategy.

Members wondered how do we address the inability for the federal party to formulate regional or multi-regional policies?

Hopgood agreed that what is applicable in the south would not automatically apply in the north. For the Liberal Democrats to have greater appeal in the north, northern councillors need to beat the drum for northern interests, and we need more younger and diverse candidates. By winning handfuls of wards in the north, success drives success

## LABOUR PIVOT

Heilbron fully agreed with Hopgood. He said that as southern campaigning does not appeal in the north we need to pivot to challenge Labour in one of their historic strongholds, and the Liberal Democrats need to understand the north.

Following questions, the panel gave their closing remarks. Ross said that the southern-dominated economy is a problem and that we as Liberal Democrats need to press that point and lobby Labour to increase investment in the region. Ross, Hopgood and Heilbron all said that it is important that we win wherever we can as these would help generate

*"We cannot simply cement a reputation as being 'soft Tories', not only out of concern over dissuading progressive, would-be Labour supporters"*

momentum for future successes. And Pickstone and Heilbron said that it is important for local parties to help each other out wherever possible to maximise the chances of success and to build mutually beneficial working relationships.

In the 2025 local elections, we Liberal Democrats made significant gains, winning outright control of the Cambridgeshire, Oxfordshire and Shropshire county councils, emerging as the leading parties on the hung Cornwall, Devon, Hertfordshire, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire councils, and bringing our total councillors

up to 3,188.

Unfortunately, Reform UK merged as the overall first-place winners, having won 677 council seats, control of 10 councils including two in the north, leading positions on three hung councils, two metro mayoralties including that of Hull and East Yorkshire, and the Runcorn and Helsby constituency. Ross sadly came second to Reform candidate - former boxer Luke Campbell - and Reform's victories in County Durham mean that Hopgood will now serve as leader of the opposition after our group maintained its share of councillors.

In continuing to hack away at the 'blue wall' in the south, Ed Davey had pledged at our local elections campaign launch that our party would supplant the Conservatives as 'the party of Middle England'. However, we cannot simply cement a reputation as being 'soft Tories', not only out of concern over dissuading progressive, would-be Labour supporters.

The north of England has long felt left behind, struggling with deindustrialisation, the southern-dominated UK economy, and austerity. The people of the region are desperate for change.

Although Reform are proposing reductive solutions, narrowly focusing on red meat issues that kick downwards at vulnerable peoples and attacking an already unpopular government as outsiders, they are successfully harnessing the frustration of a 'forgotten Britain' they hollowly claim to represent.

While we may criticise them as radical and inexperienced, others believe that they have fresh ideas and no track record of failure.

Going forward, not only do we need to consider how to present ourselves as viable alternatives to the Conservatives and Labour, we need to present ourselves as agents of direct positive change for the north. We need to consider how our policies can address their concerns and how we can improve our campaigning and messaging.

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Samuel Jackson is the chair of the Yorkshire and Humber Liberal Democrats policy committee

# HOMeward BOUND

## Reform UK exploits people's sense of disconnection among those who Labour has abandoned, says Jon Egan

Runcorn is where I lived for a brief period. It's in the borough where I ran my first election campaign and was first elected as a Labour councillor. It's a modest, unassuming sort of place, unused to dramatic events or headline exposure. That was until its now ex-MP, Mike Amesbury, decided to show off his boxing skills in a drunken assault on a mildly annoying constituent. Literally, within hours of the altercation at a Frodsham taxi rank, grainy images of the hapless MP had been shared across social media, and shortly thereafter earned him his '15 minutes' of national notoriety.

Over the next few days I spent time talking to friends and former Labour Party colleagues in the town, as well as engaging with random strangers during an immersive wander around Runcorn's two unprepossessing 'town centres'. On the basis of this admittedly less than robust piece of qualitative research, I wrote a piece for Liverpool-based *The Post*, predicting a Reform victory in the seemingly inevitable Parliamentary by-election.

### IRREDEEMABLY TARNISHED

The only surprising aspect of Reform's victory was, perhaps, the hyper-closeness of the final margin (six votes). In an interview for *Time Radio* on the eve of poll, I had predicted a Reform majority of around three thousand, and in the process irredeemably tarnished my credentials and an electoral pundit.

Labour's better than expected result may in part be explained by tactical voting by Liberal Democrat and other anti-Reform voters in what had clearly become a binary contest, but it may also have provided evidence for what Jamie Gollings, research director at the Social Market Foundation, has termed the 'Mersey Wall'.

Gollings' analysis of the 2024 general election noted an apparent disparity in the national swing to Reform in Merseyside, with Scouse voters seemingly immune to the charms of Farageism, and tenaciously loyal to their Labour heritage.

Runcorn's 'new town' area is in effect a Scouse exclave, built as part of Liverpool's slum clearance programme. It retains a distinctive political and cultural identity. But even in its staunchest electoral stronghold, I found a prevailing attitude of ingrained cynicism, disappointment and incipient anger that crystallised primarily on the decision to cut the winter fuel allowance for pensioners.

Paul Bostock, an old friend and former Labour councillor spoke for many traditional Labour voters in decrying a party that had abandoned its working class base, and that locally and nationally, had taken their votes for granted.

Only days after Amesbury's fall from grace, Reform had distributed a letter from Nigel Farage to every

household, and Bostock was alarmed by the traction that the party was gaining with his New Town neighbours. "So many people who I thought would never go down that road," he despaired, "are going down that road."

Notwithstanding the closeness of the result, for a Labour Government to lose its 15th safest seat less than 12 months after a general election to an upstart right wing party led by a man who appears to have consciously modelled his sartorial style on TV spiv Arthur Daley, is a deeply worrying omen.

Writing for *Liberator* 421 last year, I warned not to expect much from a zombie Labour Party with a hollowed-out ideology and a leader whose only discernible character trait was the absence of any discernible character traits. There is something terminal about Starmer's Labour Party. To paraphrase TS Eliot's poem, *The Hollow Men*, Labour is the hollow party that's ending not with a bang but a whimper, or as writer Ian Leslie has described, a "reedy, nasal whine" that people would prefer not to listen to.

If there is a top line message from Runcorn and the local election results for Labour, it has been gestating slowly over the last three decades. It first surfaced electorally at the Brexit referendum, and thereafter with the collapse of the 'red wall' and the defection of millions of Labour votes to Boris Johnson's brand of jingoistic populism. But it began in the infancy of New Labour with its determination to shed its historic ties to a dwindling electoral demographic which according to Peter Mandelson, "had nowhere else to go."

Labour's estrangement from its working class base has been the subject of endless musings from its recalcitrant left wing and its revisionist 'Blue Labour' right, but neither faction has as yet found a formula to win back voters who feel they have been ignored, patronised and disparaged by its dominant metropolitan cliques.

As *New Statesman* journalist Jonny Ball explained: "Labour today is almost exclusively dominated by metropolitan graduates with backgrounds in think tanks and lobbying firms. They come from another world. For working class voters, the party doesn't look or feel like home."

Whatever policy contortions Morgan McSweeney decrees to be necessary to stem voter defections to Reform, including Starmer's clumsily articulated pronouncements on immigration, they are unlikely to transform fundamental perceptions of a Government that seems irrevocably out of touch. The most shocking aspect in comparing Starmer's "island of strangers" rhetoric and Enoch Powell's infamous "rivers of blood" speech is, that unlike Powell, Starmer's remarks were not grounded in any sincerely held conviction. This was merely a position, plotted and triangulated to achieve a short term political advantage. This is cynicism elevated to a governing philosophy.

Journalists and commentators from across the ideological spectrum have opined on what Starmer must do to recover voter confidence and avert the Gotterdammerung scenario of a Reform UK led-Government. Their suggestions range from the totemic (symbolic assertions of socialist or left liberal principles) to nuanced adjustments to policies and priorities in the hope of repairing the fissures in an unravelling electoral coalition. Some, including Emily Maitlis, have bizarrely heralded the elections results as “good news for Labour,” administering the necessary shock to the system, hopefully resuscitating the premiership of a man who already appears to be nailed to his perch.

The truth is that Labour’s travails are not reducible to bad policies. They are symptomatic of a much deeper disconnect and the abandonment of what might be described as its narrative of belonging.

Narratives of belonging, whether to class, community or nation, were once integral to our politics; . Parties were grounded and guided by ideas, values and visions that were not reducible to mere policies or the caprices of ambitious individuals. People would describe themselves as being Labour, Conservative and occasionally Liberal. Political affiliations were durable, and at times almost immovable loyalties, forged by cultural, social and even spiritual relationships and obligations.

The modern malaise of uprootedness, originally discerned by the philosopher Simone Weil, was revealed to me in its frightful banality in the recent experience of an activist friend who was told by a ‘communications consultant’ during a political seminar, that he must now think of his party as “a consumer product.”

This is how Peter Mandelson and the architects of New Labour saw their mission, recasting politics for the age of consumerism and an atomised dislocated electorate.

The announcement that Reform UK was to open its first pub / social club in a working-class Blackpool neighbourhood may not have been a major political event, but it is a move of inspired genius. Labour and trade union clubs were no doubt viewed as dissonant relics at odds with the image of a modernised and aspirational party, but they were important channels and emblems of Labour’s rootedness within working class life. The potent symbolism of Reform’s Blackpool announcement is that it underscores Labour’s abandonment of its historic constituency. Across much of its former heartland, Labour is now an eerie absence whose fleeting visitations are synchronised to the electoral cycle.

Whether through inspired strategising or some inchoate instinct, Reform’s faultless exploitation of uprootedness and disinheritance is propelling their advance and imposing a wild distorting gravity on our political landscape. They are the endpoint of uprootedness, thriving in the bewildering Babel of post-modernity - a multiverse of identities but without any underpinning sense of belonging.

## BAROQUE MANIFESTATION

Their ersatz patriotism and invocation of traditional British / Christian values is about as convincing as the claims of Toby Carvery to be the custodians of

our culinary and natural heritage. They are not the antidote to our hollowed-out politics, but its most baroque manifestation. Like Trump, Farage’s genius is his transparent fraudulence, the undisguised fakery and artifice of a trickster, a grandiloquent pretence that in today’s politics is an acceptable substitute for authenticity.

I am not setting out merely to celebrate the obsequies of Starmer’s Labour Party, the malaise is deeper and more pervasive. Across the spectrum, our politics is blighted by disconnection and delusion. Politicians are in the main either ignored or despised. It is only the anonymity of opposition that has saved Kemi Badenoch from the Liz Truss lettuce test,

Perhaps the Liberal Democrats’ highly refined capacity to face in opposite directions at the same time, puts the party in an advantageous position with respect to two currently homeless political constituencies. Is it possible to fuse a coalition that includes traditional one nation Conservatism and alienated social democracy, and does this need something more subtle and more fundamental than nimble triangulation and clever messaging? Can the party of Beveridge and Keynes, that forged Britain’s post war settlement, offer more than vote catching stunts and the ability not to offend?

The true trajectory of our politics should neither be singularly forward nor backward, but homeward. Its orientation should be to satisfy the most basic human yearnings for security, stability and belonging. Since the collapse of the short-lived post-war settlement, our politics has become completely subordinated to what sociologist Jacques Ellul termed, ‘technique’ or what writer and “recovering environmentalist” Paul Kingsnorth has called The Machine - the unrelenting, self-propelling and accelerating process of economic, technological and cultural advancement. We now inhabit a world of transience, insecurity and dizzying vertigo, where, in the words of the American poet and seer, Wendell Berry, “all remembered places have been displaced.”

As a recovering political strategist, I don’t have a blueprint for a new political dispensation or a hopeful alternative to Reform UK, other than a suggestion that our political leaders spend less time listening to political strategists and more time reflecting on prophetic voices like Kingsnorth and Berry.

We need our politicians to find a more human and authentic language that can engage and inspire, that can convey rather than merely simulate honesty, empathy and compassion, and with a lexicon that includes words like beauty, truth and love. We need less noise, and more meaning. Our media is a product of The Machine and is structured to serve its ends. It functions to simplify the complex, trivialise the profound and silence the dissenting, and it has made politics in its own image.

We need politicians to abandon their facile obsession with ‘the new’, with growth, innovation, advancement and reform, and their unquestioning faith that technology, and its latest fetish AI, is indispensable to the solution of every human problem and the fulfilment of all human desires.

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# ORANGE OR GREEN?

## Sophie Layton surveys fellow students and finds the Lib Dems must be wary of the Greens' appeal

Recent polling has placed the Liberal Democrats as the most popular party for people aged 18-24, alongside the Green Party. Given that only a decade ago, the party had just been handed a phenomenal defeat after the Coalition period, the orange tide may once again be coming in, particularly after the May local elections, the rise of Reform UK, and the further falling of both Labour and the Tories.

But despite this figure, in many quarters, the Liberal Democrats still remain unpopular, and this is exemplified most clearly on university campuses, where the Liberal Democrats often feature unfavourably, if appearing at all.

Here, it is all too often that the pipeline remains, from right to left, the Conservatives, Labour and then Greens (with a turquoise Reform now starting to make gains). So given an unprecedented opportunity for further growth, how can the Liberal Democrats capitalise on this momentum, and begin to reclaim campuses as bastions of party support?

Having surveyed my peers, there are several insights that we can take. Firstly, for context, Sheffield has a fairly average Liberal Democrat presence. While we have no Liberal Democrat MPs, they are the second largest presence on the no overall control council, only eight councillors behind Labour, and were the second largest party in 2024 in the Sheffield Hallam constituency (although came 8,000 short of unseating Labour's Olivia Blake).

Of the students surveyed, 83.4% would or might consider voting Liberal Democrat, with only one saying 'no', and one only in local elections. Despite this, only 18.2% had ever actually voted for the party. In terms of attitudes towards the party, 50% view the Liberal Democrats positively, with an additional student leaning positive. But 16.7% felt neutral, and the same negatively, with one further person commenting on the party's "recent irrelevance". But seemingly confirming recent national data, 83.3%, if not voting Liberal Democrat, would vote Green, with only one person selecting Labour or the TUSC.

When asked why they would or would not consider voting Liberal Democrat, key themes emerged, most notably, tactics. Many pointed out that they're better or not as bad as others and often are more likely to win. Some pointed out that they would vote Liberal Democrat only if the Greens couldn't win. Several also pointed out that on some issues, the Liberal Democrats are more progressive than others, notably Labour but also occasionally the Greens, with drug policy and the response to transphobia mentioned (particularly following Green co-leader Adrian Ramsay's inability to confirm his stance on the validity of Trans+ women), and another praising Ed Davey's carer status. Detractors said that the party is not left enough,

and another referenced the Coalition, specifically Ed Davey's role in it.

What it was that caused students to vote a specific way was more negative. Those praising the Liberal Democrats like a lot of their politicians individually, or voted for the Liberal Democrats in specific circumstances, but overall, the response is much less positive, with many preferring an alternative or mentioning the Coalition as a breach of trust (tuition fees, and a particularly frustrated response about Nick Clegg). Others did not know enough about the party or felt the Liberal Democrats were weak or weakening on key issues, specifically trans+ rights, climate and not taking a pro-immigration and pro-welfare position.

Finally, I asked what the Liberal Democrats would need to do to win their support in the future. Many said the party needed to firmly stand against conservatism, and many said they would not support the party until no 2010-2015 Liberal Democrats were still in the House – which now only consists of Alistair Carmichael, Ed Davey, Tim Farron, Tessa Munt and Andrew George. Others mentioned the party needing to become more left-wing, a desire for a higher education plan without further fees, and rescinding support for the Supreme Court ruling on the Equality Act (2010). For others, there's no significant way to win; "It's not really about liking Lib Dem, it's about them being the best out of a terrible bunch".

So what can we take from this? The party is certainly putting the Coalition behind it, but many have not forgiven or forgotten. The charge against the Conservatives is welcomed, but others want a clearer fight against conservatism itself.

Despite positive efforts from Christine Jardine, many also want the Liberal Democrats to take a more decisive pro-trans+ stance, which they feel is lacking following the recent ruling of the Supreme Court. But besides this, and a refinement of positions on other key issues, including immigration, students want to be given a reason to vote Liberal Democrat. This may be a winning strategy across a range of cohorts, but with the disillusionment that many students feel against the Labour party, now may be the moment to capitalise on this, for good.

Despite the headline, it's clear that universities are far from won over to the Liberal Democrats, but the appeal is certainly growing. While the Liberal Democrats are incredibly unlikely to ever take out the Green Party (or ever likely to wish to), there doesn't appear to be an immediate need – unlike the Tories and Reform, they're not chasing the exact same voters. But the willingness is there, and it may prove an unlikely battleground that could be rewarding for the party in 2029.

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



# FRIENDS WITH PRIVILEGES

## The UK and EU are at least talking again post-divorce, says David Grace

What nonsense people do talk about Europe! Keir Starmer has finally negotiated a new deal with the European Union, or has he? Unsurprisingly people don't know. Keir says it's a new era. Tories and Reform cry betrayal and surrender, in Badenoch's case before she even knew what was agreed.

Liberal Democrats and Greens welcome steps forward but claim so much more could have been achieved. This is classic triangulation which must please Starmer. According to YouGov, 66% support "Britain having a closer relationship with the European Union, without rejoining the European Union, the Single Market or the Customs Union". Starmer has hit the sweet spot although I do ask the 66% what they think the new deal is and could they also explain the Single Market and the Customs Union?

What is the truth about the new deal? OK, fishing. In 2020 the EU agreed to reduce its quota of fish caught off Britain by 25%. We retained the option of removing it in 2026 but the new deal has changed that to 2038. The UK's ability to export seafood to the EU is linked to the EU's ability to fish here, which matters given that we do export 70% of our seafood to the EU. Without visiting Clacton, Farage has discovered the fishing industry (0.4% of UK economy). Tories now denounce the deal they praised in 2020 because it will last longer.

What about food? Brexit made food trade with the EU a bureaucratic nightmare, causing a 21% drop in exports and 7% drop in imports. Checks at borders will be reduced under a new Sanitary and Phytosanitary Agreement but note details and timescale remain to be negotiated. Interpretation of the agreement will involve the European Court of Justice, which has really upset the Brexiters, but for no practical reason.

The UK and the EU have agreed a security and defence framework but I use no capital letters as it is just a framework for dialogue and co-operation, an agreement to talk. The government mentions the EU's €150bn military fund SAFE which they expect the UK to take part in but there is nothing in the deal to confirm this.

Many other topics are under discussion but the deal leaves them all for further exploration, including youth experience exchanges – no details yet. It is the fact of talking and the commitment to go on talking including annual summits which make a new era. How sad but good that just talking is seen as a great new thing after the chaos and lies of Boris Johnson and David Frost.

The 2024 election was removed from reality in the bizarre results of the first-past-the-post system (even when we like them) and widespread dishonesty about tax but the fundamental issue everyone tried to keep silent about was the UK's relationship with the EU. Our party's policy is to join the Single Market but

we were very careful not to talk about it, even at conference let alone in the election. We have become braver since then and now advocate an ad-hoc customs union with the EU. This is fine because nobody knows what it means. According to YouGov 28% strongly support the Customs Union, 12% strongly oppose but 31% don't know.

What is this visceral opposition to talking to Europe which Reform and Tories indulge every time they speak? The problem is they won the referendum and cannot back away from it. They are skewered by their own false rhetoric whatever the facts disclose. They repeat that dealing with the EU is surrendering our sovereignty and turning the UK into a rule-taker. I wonder what attitude these people have to marriage or friendship or even joining a club. In the real world there is no such thing as complete independence; it's an adolescent fantasy. Grown-ups talk, negotiate, compromise.

In the case of trade, sovereignty is arrant nonsense. If you want to sell your goods or services to any country, you have to meet their laws about those products. British businesses selling to the EU already know this. They are rule-takers already (as with trade anywhere).

Why are we rule-takers with the EU? Because Farage and Badenoch and all the dinosaurs campaigned successfully to leave the EU and thus remove our votes. What about the freedom to set our own standards? If you are a British business you don't want to produce your products to different standards for different destinations; it would make production harder and more expensive. If you meet EU standards you will have met or exceeded the standards for other countries as the EU ones are usually the highest. Although not written in blood the new deal envisages that the UK will continue to meet EU standards (dynamic alignment). This is not a consequence of the deal; it was always so if trade was to continue. Who will interpret the standards in case of dispute? The ECJ of course. Who did you expect? Friends of Nigel?

So here we are, still divorced but talking again and sharing, friends with privileges.

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David Grace is a member of the Liberator Collective

# WAKE UP TIME IN CANADA

## Rebecca Tinsley reports on how Donald Trump's bellicose rhetoric drove a surprise Liberal victory in the 'true north'

"Whenever I saw someone flying the Canadian flag on their car or their house, I dismissed them as morons, nut jobs, conspiracy theorists," says a 60-year-old voter in southern Ontario.

"But then Trump began to show the world what true populism could do to our country. We're still not united on many issues, but now we're resolute in keeping our sovereignty. Thank you, Donald Trump, for waking us up."

On 6 May, a week after riding to an unexpected victory on the back of opposition to Trump's demeaning threats, Canadian prime minister Mark Carney told Trump that "some places are not for sale. Canada is not for sale."

On 28 April, the Liberals, under the newly minted leadership of the former Bank of England governor, won 169 seats out of 342 ridings (three seats short of forming a majority administration in Ottawa).

The New Democratic Party and Greens collapsed as the national campaign became a straight choice between a previously Trump-aligned Conservative Party and the Trump-hostile Liberals who were seen as better placed to defend Canadian independence.

Until Trump's diatribes about the "51st state", the Tories had been leading in the polls, capitalising on Liberal prime minister Justin Trudeau's unpopularity, the cost of living, migration, a chronic housing shortage, and anger about environmental policy.

When the Liberals dumped Trudeau in January, Carney swiftly emerged as the favourite to replace him. Some, however, worried that the Grits (as the party is known) would repeat their previous mistake when they chose the otherworldly Harvard professor Michael Ignatieff, who failed to inspire the voters in 2011.

### DAVOS MAN

Yet, clever political ads featuring Carney hanging around a hockey rink with Canadian comedian Mike Meyers dispelled fears that the ultimate Davos Man would be too elitist to stomach.

For some years, Tory leader Pierre Poilievre had been mimicking Trump's crude rhetoric, but once the US president began belittling Canada, Poilievre became toxic. In the event, he lost his own riding.

Some Conservatives criticise Ontario's popular Tory provincial premier Doug Ford who failed to campaign for Poilievre. Ford, who nurtures his bulldog persona, is outspoken about punishing Americans by cutting the power Canada sells to several states, encouraging consumer boycotts of US goods. He is thought to have his eye on the Conservative Party leadership, although members might not forgive him for distancing himself from Poilievre.

Impressive as Carney's victory is, he faces profound structural issues in Canada. He must dirty his hands

with far more than defending Canadian sovereignty, as he did, calmly but clearly, when he met Trump in the Oval Office.

In 2022, a 'Freedom Convoy' of truckers occupied the Canadian capital for three weeks, bringing Ottawa to a standstill. They were protesting against a federal Covid-19 vaccine mandate for truck drivers crossing the US-Canada border. But their voices were soon echoed by the provinces whose economies were threatened by Trudeau's environment policies.

In turn, the famously migrant-welcoming Canadians began grumbling about the numbers of overseas students arriving in Canada and the rocketing cost of real estate. Trudeau invoked the Emergencies Act – the first time the law had been used – allowing police to clear the streets of demonstrators.

As a thirty-something NDP voter in small town Ontario commented: "This was our January 6th insurrection. It highlighted the chasm between Canada's provinces, the resentment of the so-called liberal elite in Ontario and Quebec, and the resource-based economy of Alberta where no one wants green restrictions."

Alberta's grievances are based on a myth that it subsidises the rest of the Canadian economy. In fact, Ontario leads by generating 38% of GDP, followed by Quebec with 22% and Alberta with 17%.

For decades, Canadians celebrated the arrival of striving migrants, acknowledging the way in which they boost the economy and enjoying their cuisine. It is a sign of how chronic the housing shortage has become that inhabitants of the True North have soured on inward migration. Trudeau's government reacted too slowly to the misuse of overseas student visas, throttling back on the numbers who vanish after a few weeks of college. Their presence would have been tolerated, not least because they do jobs many locals avoid. However, it was the strain on the housing supply which turned the debate poisonous. It hasn't helped that half of Shanghai seemed to be pushing condo prices in Vancouver through the roof as they purchased bolt holes in case President Xi comes after their money.

Many Canadians are reeling at the unleashing of American aggression as inarticulately articulated by Trump since his January 2025 inauguration.

Trump has two reasons to dislike Canada. First, his properties in Vancouver and Toronto were disasters. At a time (2012) when 400 condo towers were successfully built in Toronto, only one failed, and that was the one with Trump's name on it.

"It's pretty hard to make a mess of real-estate investment in Toronto," according to a lawyer representing investors who claimed they were misled. Meanwhile, in 2020 Trump's name was removed from a development in Vancouver that eventually closed.

Added to which, Melania was pictured drooling over the photogenic Justin Trudeau on at least one public occasion.

For Canadians, it is surreal to contemplate an American president ordering a military attack on Canada if bringing the Canadian economy to its knees through tariffs fails. Yet, they shouldn't have been surprised by the arrogance and insensitivity of the elephant to the south: even educated Americans known to your correspondent cannot grasp why Canadians don't welcome the chance to become the 51st state.

Americans are raised to unquestioningly believe theirs is (to quote a West Coast professor) "the greatest country ever in the history of the world". They assume every citizen on earth wants to be like them. Bear in mind that many Americans believe that owning a passport is unpatriotic. Americans have never grasped that the reason Canadians embrace the monarchy, albeit sniggering at the House of Windsor's antics and disasters, is that it distinguishes them from the States. Americans fail to appreciate the cultural differences between the two societies.

For instance, although Canadians own guns in the same numbers per head as Americans do, they refrain from slaughtering each other with the same enthusiasm. Whereas Americans hire an attorney to sue people with whom they have a dispute (if they haven't shot them, that is), Canadians set up a committee or have a conversation. See Michael Moore's documentary film *Bowling for Columbine*: he compares placid Windsor, Ontario - which is literally the other side of the bridge from Detroit - and the former motor city, now auditioning for the role of Hades.

## CANCELLED VACATIONS

What is clear is that Canadians will never again trust America. Snowbirds are selling their homes in Florida, South Carolina, Arizona, and California, while Canadians are cancelling vacations south of the border, flight routes are being cancelled, and Canadian media feature horror stories about visitors being shackled and humiliated at the US border. The city of Palm Springs has lined its streets with Maple Leaf flags, hoping to repair the damage, and California governor Gavin Newsome has sent friendly messages north. But, in the words of an Ontario voter who regularly popped across the border to attend rock concerts in Buffalo: "Screw them and the Tesla they rode in on. This whole thing reveals the real face of America."

Celebrating his victory on election night, Carney acknowledged: "We need to think big and act bigger."

That means removing the quaint cross-provincial trade barriers and bureaucracy, making it easier to build affordable housing, and opening up investment opportunities. It also means closer ties with the EU

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and UK. Yet, there are more structural issues facing the world's second largest nation.

Since the 1960s, Canadians have bemoaned the fact that although the country is rich in minerals (zinc, uranium, aluminium, gold, nickel, copper, cobalt, iron ore, platinoids, cadmium), they are sent elsewhere for processing.

Far more Canadians work in service industries than in manufacturing, meaning that Canada misses an opportunity to refine and process its natural resource wealth before exporting it to the rest of the world; 58% of Canadian exports are

agricultural, energy, forestry and mining. This makes up 30% of the nation's GDP. America takes 73% of those exports, meaning it has the leverage to cripple the Canadian economy if it chooses.

In addition, productivity lags the USA, as do levels of investment in research. Carney's challenge is to nudge Canada into investing in high tech manufacturing, rather than trying to recreate the metal bashing-dependent 1950s Grand Rapids (as Trump dreams of doing in the USA).

In addition, a quarter of the Canadian workforce is employed by the government at federal, provincial or local level. That compares with 17% of the workforce in the UK, 14% in the USA and 11% in Germany.

On an anecdotal level, only one member of my extended middle-class Canadian family works in the private sector: the rest are government employees, retiring young and drawing a generous pension.

Another anecdote based on conversations with recent arrivals in Canada, reflecting a view heard 60 years ago: "It's easy to make it here because the locals are so laid back." Perhaps this contributes to a unique Canadian phenomenon: the passionate enthusiasm of New Canadians for their adopted home: "They're here six months and they're boring you to death with how wonderful the damn place is," says a resident of Vancouver. "All except the weather, of course."

Canada has much going for it: skilled immigrants from around the world want to go there (my African friends once favoured the USA but now say it is "full of racists"); its social security safety net is admired; it has a reputation for minimal corruption, and it is a more equal society than south of the border, with low levels of income disparity.

Although Trump denies it, the US needs Canada for more than the electricity and oil it supplies: their northern neighbour is the biggest export market of 35 American states. 23% of US exports go to Canada, which is twice what the US sells to the EU. Trump's lack of economic coherence and strategy harms Americans, too. What is now clear is that a 'tariff deal' only lasts until the next rush of blood to the head. Keir Starmer might take note of that, too.

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Rebecca Tinsley was born in Toronto and still holds a Canadian passport



# ALIENATING AUSSIES

## A little help from Donald Trump saw Labor easily defeat Australia's misnamed Liberal party, reports Stephen Yolland

A prevailing belief has gained currency that the Liberal-National Party Coalition in Australia – hereinafter called the Coalition – were soundly defeated by the Aussie public's awareness of Trump and his policies, and their trenchant dislike of them.

This is an overly simplistic analysis, but let's first of all give it some credence.

In point of fact, the Coalition tried manfully to distance itself from most of the Trump agenda. Trump's tariffs, for example, were particularly poorly received by Aussies, not only because they seemed to introduce chaotic disruption to the rules-based world trade order on which Australia depends more than most, but also because Australia imports more from America than vice versa.

Thus Trumpanomics failed what Aussies call "the sniff test". Why were Aussie businesses punished for being a good friend to America, especially when that also applied to defence relationships in particular, including a recent \$386bn investment in American nuclear-powered submarines.

So while a few mainly far-right supporters of the Coalition maintained their vocal support for Trump, most did not.

Secondly, the furore over Trump's immigration behaviours, and especially the role of Immigration and Customer Enforcement (ICE) in arresting and detaining apparently innocent holidaymakers at entry ports into the USA, played especially badly with Australians.

### PERSONALLY THREATENED

As regular visitors to America they not unreasonably felt personally threatened by this development, but also because with a strong – some might say, defining – cultural commitment to fairness in public policy, it was clear that the roundups of people and their deportation to hideous prisons and camps overseas - with little or no recourse to protection from the courts - were wrong-headed in the extreme.

This writer personally knows at least three families who decided not to travel to the USA this year as a result. The overall number would be huge.

Although the Coalition did not support these American measures, key figures on their front bench, including leader Peter Dutton, had a long history of being very hard on immigrants - including, in Dutton's case, being part of a long fight to keep a Sri Lankan family from settling in rural Queensland, despite the fact that the family had a well-founded fear of persecution in Sri Lanka, had two young Australian-born daughters, a local community in Biloela who wanted them to be allowed to settle there, and a petition garnering 600,000 supporters arguing they should be granted residency.

It was not a big leap to assume that a Dutton-led

Government would resume a strong Trump-style anti-immigration stance, which while popular with the 'right of the right' supporters of the Coalition, did not attract more moderate potential voters.

So what else was at play? Well, the single biggest stumbling block for the Coalition was undoubtedly the look, tone and manner of their leader. When Dutton was elected as Liberal leader three years ago, after Anthony Albanese's first election victory, I opined: "The Australian people will never vote for a Dutton-led Government".

In the wake of the worst defeat in the history of the Liberal Party since its formation by Robert Menzies in 1945, I am either therefore an electoral genius, or someone with a talent for stating the bleeding obvious.

For one thing, Dutton is most unfortunate-looking for a politician. He's a bald, oval-faced man who is known universally throughout the country (and in a thousand social media memes) as Mr Potato Head. An ex-policeman, his features are habitually set in a 'strong man' grimace, seeking gravitas that he rarely demonstrates, and he has little or natural flair or amenability.

His Labor opponent Albanese has an easy and likeable manner a face amusingly akin to a squashed marrow, and patently obviously exudes sincere care and concern for society's weaker cohorts. In short, he matches the naturally easy-going and inclusive Australian culture, to the point where he is usually referred to by his nickname, Albo, by commentators and public alike.

In an increasingly presidential system, where great power is invested in the prime minister, the contrast could hardly have been more stark. An uncomfortable, stiff-shirted grump (and real estate millionaire) or an attractive 'everybody's uncle' battler (from a single-parent family in Sydney's poorer Western suburbs). Game over.

But this does not explain the scale of Albo's and Labor's destruction of the Coalition.

On policy matters the Coalition seemed all at sea in more ways than one. For one thing, after decades of being fierce economic managers, cutters and low spenders, every time Labour announced a big-spending social policy, the Coalition simply adopted it, albeit with some difference in the details of their implementation.

On housing, immigration, tax, disability provision and most critically, health, you couldn't get a sheet of paper between the positions of both major parties.

This policy drift to the centre, poorly explained or argued for, came into stark focus when, in what was assumed at that point to be a close election, Dutton was forced to walk back a commitment to sack 41,000 federal civil servants (from a workforce of 213,000), and replaced it with waffle about hiring freezes, natural attrition and voluntary redundancies.

Someone had clearly failed to point out to him that in a population of about 26-27 million, the original policy would make about 1% of the population very nervous about their careers, and that 1% has often been the difference between the major parties in a federal election. But Dutton's backflip came too late, and his abrogation of the policy meant he looked weak, vacillating and somewhat desperate.

Long ago, I stood entranced in a hotel bar in Bournemouth as Tony Benn, clutching his pipe and a cup of tea, explained to me that people would never vote for Labour being a party of bastards "because they know that we're not really bastards, we don't do a good job of it, and anywhere there's always the real bastards they can vote for. If they want the bastards, they'll vote Tory."

The quintessential opposite appeared to be the case for the Liberals in Australia in 2025. "They know we're not really nice people, we don't do a good job of it, and anywhere there's already a really nice guy they can vote for. If they want the nice people they'll vote Labor." And so they duly did.

On one area of policy, the Coalition were both brave and differentiated from Labour, and yet staggeringly less than competent.

Energy policy has long been a live concern for Australians. As one of the world's largest repository for oil, gas and coal, Aussies could simply continue burning fossil fuels till the cows come home (or choke to death) without feeling any pain. And, indeed, large portions of the public believe just that (including the agrarian rump of conservative voters known as the National Party). But pro-environment small-G green members of the public are equally trenchant in their desire to see more and better renewables play their role, and in a country surrounded by rugged and often unpopulated coastlines, with vast expanses of windswept plains, let alone being reliably drenched in sunshine almost every day of the year, there are few places in the world better suited to new energy systems.

There has long been an undercurrent of speculation in Australia that nuclear energy could offer a non-polluting alternative to both these models, and should therefore be considered. So the Coalition said it would scale back renewables generation and instead promised to build seven government-owned nuclear power plants by the mid-2040s.

Until then, it would rely on running coal plants for longer and ramp up domestic gas production, and it wanted gas companies to divert more supply to the Australian market, rather than shipping it offshore.

## URANIUM FILLED

The policy went down like a uranium-filled balloon, not least in those Coalition-held seats on or near those seven locations, where there were excess swings to the Albanese government. But the real policy cock-up was in the costing and timing of any such shift, with Labor continually advertising the plan as costing A\$600bn plus (and where was that money going to come from, viewers, if not out of your pockets?) and the fact that new plants would only come online by the time Australia had already achieved its net zero climate goal anyway.

Layer that on a society which has always been instinctively anti-nuclear anything anyway, and the recipe spelled electoral disaster for the Coalition. They couldn't answer any of the criticisms of the plan adequately, either in statements or ads, so people simply voted Labor.

Or they voted Greens, or independent proto-Greens, which was the other major contributing factor in the Coalition's demise. Australia has long had a strong third party alternative to the two major parties, originally with the Australian Democrats (formed, memorably, to "keep the bastards honest" as a check on the two main parties) and after their decline the Greens, regularly polling more than 10%, and holding the balance of power in the federal upper chamber, the Senate.

Added into the mix, and funded by pro-climate philanthropists, has also grown a network of 'Teal' independents, centre-left alternatives to the Coalition, campaigning almost exclusively in Coalition-held seats where a large percentage of well-to-do Coalition voters (so-called 'doctor's wives') could be reliably called upon to lend their vote to environment-aware and socially-liberal candidates who would reliably fit into, say, the current Liberal Democrats.

The movement began in a hard-right rural seat in Victoria, and spread rapidly, and includes other non-aligned independents with similar platforms. In 2025 the Teal vote added up to 7%, concentrated in a few key seats. Of the 27 Teal candidates, 22 of them were seeking to unseat MPs elected for the Coalition.

For the first time, one million Aussies voted either Green, Teal or Independent: their support has doubled since the global financial crisis in 2008 and seems set to continue. Australia is another country now in a 'post-two-party' world.

Nevertheless, the ultimate story of this election is both the broad appeal and the stunning success of the Labor campaign. Despite a cost-of-living crisis, and while the media demanded to know who independents would support for prime minister or what they would demand in a hung parliament, Labor actually won more than a dozen seats off the Liberals and three off the Greens too, making such hypotheticals irrelevant. They won in their own right.

It could be argued that Labor simply gamed Australia's AV electoral system better than the Coalition. Minor parties and independents are on track to gain a record share, at 33.4%, but although Labor won just 34.6% and the Coalition 32% of first preferences, Labor secured a huge majority after preference flows.

But whether as a direct vote for Labor, or by transferring their vote to Labor after first plumping for a Green, Teal or independent candidate, Australians were emphatically voting no to Peter Dutton. And ultimately, that was the ball game.

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Stephen Yolland has been a member of the Liberals and then the Liberal Democrats for nearly 50 years. He is the party's representative in Australia and sits on the executive committee of Liberal Democrats Overseas

# IF MINDS MEET IN MOSCOW

In a glimpse into Russia's future, Edward Lucas looks at the possibility of a rapprochement between Russia and the United States - and highlights the likely price that Europeans will pay

As the chords of the Preobrazhensky March echoed across Red Square, marking the start of Russia's annual Victory Parade, a hum of surprise spread through the crowd, followed by gasps and then cheers. Immaculate in their dress uniforms, a detachment of US Marines entered the parade, their polished boots reflecting the early May sunshine. At the centre of the rostrum above Lenin's mausoleum, Vladimir Putin turned and embraced his American guest of honour. Donald Trump beamed. Finally, a proper parade, a proper welcome from a proper leader.

As the military spectacle drew to a close, the leaders retired to a gala dinner in the glittering surroundings of the Kremlin's Catherine Hall. In front of 2,000 guests, they toasted a new age of economic, diplomatic and military cooperation between their two great countries. President Trump promised to push for the permanent and complete lifting of all sanctions on Russia, and the withdrawal of what he called "unnecessary" US forces in Europe. President Putin pledged his country's support in dealing with "common problems", starting with what he called "offensive" European Union efforts to regulate the single market. "Your data giants and our energy companies are similarly disadvantaged by the Brussels bureaucrats" he declaimed. "And together we will deal with it."

He concluded with a flourish: "Americans and Russians beat the Nazis then. We'll do it again now".

After dinner, the leader and their closest aides retired to Putin's private Kremlin quarters - a rare honour - for informal drinks and discussion. In a thoughtful touch, the Russian president had an aide bring President Trump a cheeseburger; the American guest had barely touched the stuffed sturgeon steak in champagne sauce.

"I like simple food too," the Russian president confided. "Indeed, we have so much in common, Donald" he continued in his accented but fluent English. "We both believe in a strong state with a strong leader. We understand that business and power work hand in hand. I have made Russia great again. You have made America great again."

Trump's face flushed with pleasure. His diplomatic masterstroke had paid off beyond his wildest dreams. Only a year ago, in 2025, he had been floundering, with his tariff wars tanking the economy, his bluff called by China, and his Ukraine peace plan roundly rejected by that pesky Volodymyr Zelensky and his European friends.

How quickly they had folded. He had not just cut off intelligence support and military aid to the Ukrainians. He had ordered the Supreme Allied Commander Europe, the senior US military officer

in Nato, to return to Washington DC. Faced with instructions to pull the US out of Nato's command structure, General Christopher G Cavoli had resigned. He was never replaced. The message to the Europeans — and their friends in the US — was clear: get in my way and you are on your own.

Nato countries turned to Britain for leadership. One simple move put paid to that. A Royal Navy Vanguard-class submarine was heading to the Kings Bay naval base in Georgia for routine maintenance of its Trident missiles.

## BRITISH DETERRENT SPIKED

In a terse message to the British prime minister Keir Starmer, delivered, insultingly, by a junior defence attaché from the London embassy, the Brits were warned that "scheduling difficulties" would mean that the service, vital for keeping the nuclear deterrent operational, would be postponed indefinitely. In 25 words, the United States had shown just how special the "special relationship" really was.

Deprived of leadership and military support, and awash with millions of refugees from a broken and despairing Ukraine. Europe flailed. The Nordic and Baltic countries, along with Poland, circled the wagons, trying desperately to create a regional collective defence alliance. Other European countries swallowed their pride and tried to restore their relations with Russia.

But the United States had got in first. Under the slogan "?????, ?????, ?????", US oil and companies had picked up the threads of the businesses they abandoned when sanctions were imposed following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Russian money flooded into the United States too. Much of it benefited the Trump business empire.

In the background, a pianist quietly played Moscow Nights "... the dawn's becoming ever brighter. So please, just be good. Don't you, too, forget These summer, Moscow nights".

Putin leaned towards Trump. "Tomorrow we will take things to the next level," he said. "I have a small surprise for you — a gift. I have found a site for Trump Tower Moscow. I hope you will do me the honour of accompanying me to visit it."

Trump summoned his secretary of state, Lara Loomer — so much better than that two-faced Marco Rubio, whom he had so enjoyed firing last year. "We have some ideas too," he said, producing sheets of paper with bullet points in bold typeface and large font. Trump was never a details man.

"First thing is the EU. You don't like it. I don't like it. Very nasty people. Let's deal with them. You offer Germany a gas and oil deal. We tell the Germans to take it. The EU complains. Germans ignores



them. End of EU. No more problems for our tech guys. No more problems for you.”

With a wave, Trump invited defence secretary Majorie Taylor Greene to perch on the side of the couch. “Next up is Nato. It’s finished. We’re done. Majorie here is ordering all US troops out of Europe by the year-end. You deal with these countries as you like. But no shooting. Just tickle them a little, like you did in where was it – Latvia?”

Putin smiled sardonically. Russian hooligans, led by plain-clothes officers from the GRU military intelligence, had recently stormed Latvian government offices, burning down the Saima parliament building in Riga in protest against “discrimination” against Russian-speakers. “We have many ways of making our views known,” he said cryptically — official Kremlin sources had strenuously denied any involvement. Putin gestured to his foreign intelligence chief, Sergei Naryshkin, who came over to the group, but stood awkwardly waiting to be asked to sit down.

“Naryshkin here has many more ideas,” said Putin, ostentatiously leaving his sidekick standing. The spymaster creased his face into his trademark vulpine smile. “Excellencies,” he said, “we have identified the most difficult and troublesome people in every country in Europe. They are sometimes politicians, sometimes officials, sometimes journalists, sometimes academics or think-tankers. Despite our successes they still pose difficulties for us

“Lock ‘em up!” said Trump. “That’s what I did.”

“Indeed, Mr President,” continued Naryshkin smoothly, “and you have the great good fortune to have the levers of power in your hands, a result of your great election victory.”

Trump scowled, happily. His limited attention span made complex questions tiring. It was always good to return to his favourite subject.

“They got the message, good and hard” he said.

“But in most European countries, we do not yet have that power, so my suggestion is that we use the technique developed by one of your predecessors — in English it is called ‘rendition’”.

Trump struggled briefly with the idea that any of his predecessors could have done anything praiseworthy.

“Just as you seized potential terrorists anywhere in the world, we will do the same to these troublemakers. Our penetration of European government security structures, and our domestic surveillance, has advanced greatly. Our special forces now travel freely within Europe. They can bring almost anyone to Moscow within hours. We can either put them on trial for extremism here, or simply kill them, and let their friends, shall we say, digest their disappearance.”

## PESKY JUDGES

Trump nodded, thoughtfully. At home, he had a similarly, and signally successful policy: depriving

*“At the centre of the rostrum above Lenin’s mausoleum, Vladimir Putin turned and embraced his American guest of honour. Donald Trump beamed”*

Americans of citizenship and deporting them to jails in El Salvador. It worked particularly well with those pesky judges and lawyers. This sounded pleasantly familiar.

Putin interjected “This will not only deal with these troublemakers as individuals, it will also strike fear into all others of this type.” He nodded brusquely to Naryshkin, who continued: “Mr President. As a sign of friendship, we invite you to prioritise those who you have found particularly disrespectful or difficult.

Trump frowned. Revenge ranked along with golf as

his favourite hobby. “Posobiec will give you names,” he said, pointing at his national security adviser. “But start with those Europeans. Who’s that blonde chick, the shouty one?”

Foreign minister Lavrov leaned into the group. “That would be Kaja Kallas, Mr President, the former Estonian prime minister and then the so-called foreign minister of the European Union. I believe her family already has some connections with our beautiful, faraway region of Siberia. It will be my pleasure to ensure that she renews them.”

The Kremlin clock chimed through the small hours. Night was falling deeply over Moscow. And all of Europe was in its shadow.

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Edward Lucas fought Cities of London and Westminster for the Liberal Democrats in 2024. He is a former senior editor at The Economist, and earlier co-founded an English-language weekly in Estonia. He has also been a foreign correspondent based in Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Moscow and the Baltic states

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# WALES STARTS TO RECOVER

Once a Lib Dem stronghold, the party in Wales looked in dangerous decline a few years ago but is now fighting back, reports Peter Black

Whisper it softly, but are the Welsh Liberal Democrats on the verge of a revival?

We are taking small steps, but so far it has all been forward momentum and there is growing optimism within the party that we can exceed expectations in next year's Senedd elections.

The first buds of this political spring came in a council by-election in Penllergaer, a suburb of Swansea that has been an independent stronghold for some time. Realistically, nobody was going to beat the former councillor's widower, but this was an area being targeted strongly by Reform, and there were signs that they had some pockets of strength there.

Despite this, a very active community-based campaign enabled Liberal Democrat Howard Evans to secure second-place, ahead of Farage's self-described 'pugilist,' in a ward we have never fought before.

And then a week later, Welsh Lib Dem Susan Grounds took a council seat in Ystalyfera and Cwmllynfell on Neath Port Talbot Council (I challenge Ed Davey to say that on live television), a ward held previously by one Labour and one Plaid Cymru councillor and one in which we have never stood before.

This ward is now part of the redrawn Brecon, Radnor and Cwmtawe seat, which in accordance with the boundary commission's wishes stretches all the way down the Swansea valley as far as Pontardawe.

4 July is the fortieth anniversary of the Brecon and Radnorshire by-election that saw Richard Livesey come through the middle in a Conservative-Labour marginal to win by just 559 votes. In all that time the local party has neglected to target the local government wards in the south of the constituency.

Fortunately, new MP David Chadwick has taken a different stance and is now properly organising in the Swansea Valley part of his constituency. As a result, an effort was made to find a candidate for Ystalyfera and Cwmllynfell, following the resignation of the Labour councillor for the area, and a full-scale campaign launched.

## KITCHEN SINK

The result was a dramatic win, 34 votes ahead of Plaid Cymru, who threw the proverbial kitchen sink at the contest, with Labour coming fourth behind Reform. On the same night we won two seats on Mold Town Council in North Wales, while a week later we won a by-election for Ystradgynlais Town Council in Cwmtwrch, also in the Swansea valley.

We have now selected lead candidates for our five leading Senedd constituency seats and are in the process of selecting for the other eleven. Each of these seats will elect six members of the Senedd by a closed d'hondt list system.

Currently, opinion polls for the Senedd have us on

just 5%, but we don't believe that this reflects what is possible next May. Actual votes in real ballot boxes place us in a much stronger position. There is evidence to show that where we campaign hard, we can pick up disaffected Labour and Tory votes, and outpoll Reform, who the media seem to believe are best placed to attract disaffected voters.

We won't do this everywhere of course, but in our target seats, where we are working hard, we think that we have an excellent chance of success, aided by differential turnouts and the policy positions we are now developing.

And it is this policy platform that underlines our relevance to people all around Wales, in contrast to the view expressed by one former member and naysayer on the Nation Cymru website.

As a party we have taken the lead in campaigning on water quality issues. The figures show that that over 937,000 hours of sewage dumping took place in Wales last year. It is estimated that Wales is the worst-affected part of the UK for sewage discharges in rivers, seas and beauty spots. On this side of Offa's Dyke, it is the Welsh Labour Government who are responsible for the sewage crisis, and it is getting worse.

But we are not just talking about and campaigning for change, we are delivering it on all our key priorities.

The budget deal that was struck by our sole MS, Jane Dodds, with the Labour government earlier this year saw over £100m being devoted to several important policy areas.

The two biggest allocations were an additional £30m for social care, targeting hospital discharge delays and supporting community-based care, and £30m to extend childcare for all two-year-olds in flying start areas and to provide an increase in hourly rates for providers to £6.40.

Crucially, we insisted that the money for social care should not be a one-off but be mainstreamed into council budgets in future years.

We also agreed a local authority funding floor so that no council in Wales would receive a revenue support grant increase of less than 3.8% and doubled the amount set aside for a supported borrowing initiative that will now make an additional £120m available over a two-year period to fix the nation's deteriorating road network. That will be a very popular Focus success story.

The budget deal also enables us to deliver on a long-standing Welsh Liberal Democrats policy of cheaper bus fares for those under-21 years old. This pilot will run from September 2025 to August 2026 and will deliver a flat-rate £1 single fare (£3 day ticket for unlimited travel) for all passengers aged five to 21 anywhere in Wales at a cost of £15m.





## SEWAGE BLIGHT

Nor did we forget to use the negotiations to help with local community facilities. The deal included £5m to help make local leisure centres more energy efficient and £5m to improve playgrounds. We also asked for and got, an additional £5m for Natural Resources Wales to enforce better water quality in our rivers and on our coasts, tackling some of the pollution and sewage that is blighting our environment.

Finally, we ensured that extra money was also directed to help areas where we have elected representatives. This included more than £2m to be shared between four projects: scoping/technical work for the Wyeside Arts Centre in Builth Wells, for the North Powys Wellbeing Campus, for Pont y Bat road junction and for the Brynamman Lido.

There was £1.25m to restore a fifth train service on the Heart of Wales line, an issue the Welsh Liberal Democrats have been campaigning for in Knighton, and £10m for rural investment schemes.

This budget deal was an example of the party using its political leverage to improve the lives of everybody across Wales, as well as showing how with just one MS we can make a difference. We could do so much more with a full team of MSs after the next set of elections.

The Welsh Liberal Democrats are the only party in Wales who want to empower individuals and communities, who are opposed to the over-centralisation of power in the hands of the Welsh and UK Governments that is being promoted by the

Labour, Tory and Plaid Cymru parties, and who have demonstrated by actions and words our commitment to tackling climate change and improving our environment.

We recognise the need to reform the health service at a local level by investing in social care, and to improve education provision for all children through the curriculum reforms and changes to additional needs provision introduced by former Welsh Liberal Democrat minister Kirsty Williams, as well as the pupil development grant that is paid to all schools to assist with the education of our poorest children, introduced in a previous budget deal by the Liberal Democrats.

And we have also shown our commitment to improving poor housing, tackling homelessness, building up rural communities and improving our economy. David Chadwick's championing of Tata Steel in particular, has shown that we will not stand for Labour or the Tories treating Wales as second best.

It is for all these reasons that we believe that we have grounds for optimism as we approach the Senedd elections in 2026. We believe that we may be taking small steps now, but in a year's time they will amount to a giant leap forward for the Welsh Liberal Democrats.

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Peter Black is a Liberal Democrat councillor in Swansea and former Senedd member



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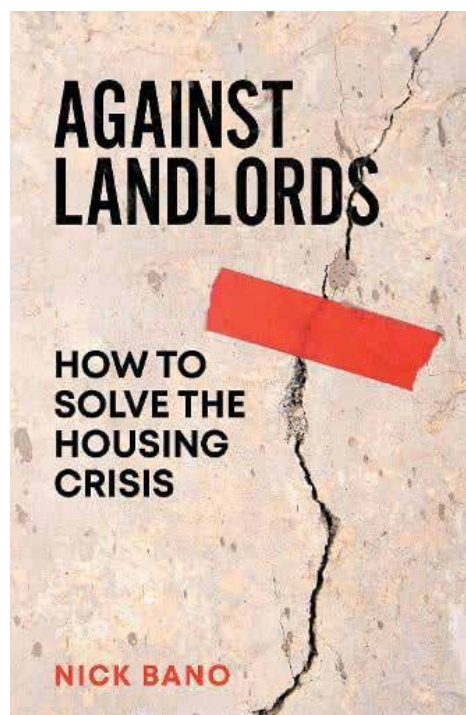
**Against Landlords:  
How to Solve the  
Housing Crisis  
by Nick Bano  
Verso, 2025 £10.99**

The idea that British industry is held back from fuelling a golden age of economic growth only by excessive regulation used to be a staple of right-wing think tanks. In recent years, however, it has become increasingly popular in left-wing think tanks too, with the planning laws seen as the particular enemy.

One reason for this is that people who work for left-wing think tanks have more in common with people in right-wing think tanks than they do with the rest of the population. They live in the same city and went to the same schools, for instance.

And creating a new folk-devil, the Nimby, does save an awful lot of, well, thought. Once you have given people who disagree with you a label, then you need only invoke that label to invalidate their arguments (see also 'woke', 'remoaner', 'terf', 'boomer' and many others).

So you can condemn Nimbys and sound left-wing without asking whether planning laws are really the problem when approaching 90% of all planning applications are approved; without asking whether the building industry would be able or willing to participate in a boom large enough to reduce house prices noticeably; and without asking



# REVIEWS

why some children go to the sort of schools that produce people who work for think tanks and some don't.

Nick Bano, in this short and readable book, argues that our problem is not a shortage of supply but the scourge of landlordism. Fifty years ago, private landlords, from Rachman to Rigsby, were derided and the breed seemed to be on the way out. Now daytime television shows have would-be buy-to-let landlords as their heroes.

The problem, as Adam Smith and Karl Marx both argued, is that rented housing is a natural monopoly. The level of rent is set, not by competition between landlords, but by how much tenants can afford to pay for shelter. So, rather than look to more house building to solve our problems, Bano argues, we need more tenant activism and legal reforms.

At last year's general election, the Liberal Democrats advocated an increase in house-building to 380,000 a year across the UK, but in calling for this figure to include 150,000 social homes, delivered through new garden cities and community-led development of cities and towns, we did show some concern about the form of tenure and the quality of what is delivered.

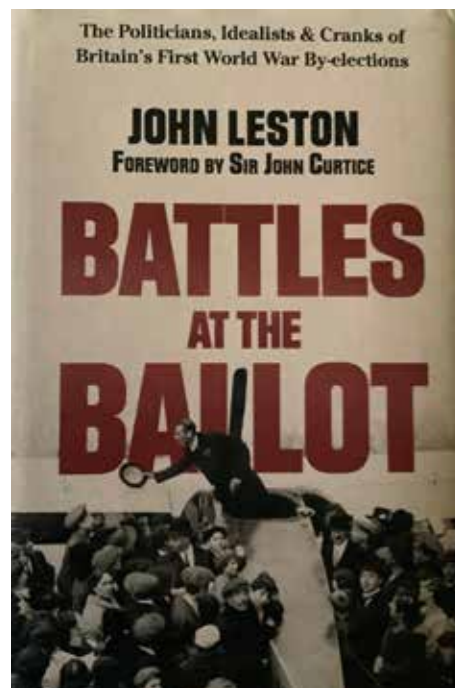
Oh, and Bano offers a neat label to use in retaliation. If someone calls you a Nimby, call them a Supply Guy in return.

Jonathan Calder

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**Battles at the Ballot  
by John Leston  
Haythorp Books £20**

At the outbreak of the First World War, there was an agreement between the major parties that any parliamentary by-elections would be uncontested, with the party holding the seat merely nominating a candidate who would be returned unopposed. During this period, there were 118 vacancies, and yet in 29 of these cases, the convention broke down and elections were



held.

John Leston's book examines at some length the majority of these by-elections, and while in only three cases was the defending party defeated, the contested elections provided the opportunity for issues to be aired and messages sent to the established parties – much as in the case with by-elections over the last 100 years.

Not a lot changes over the years: the 1914-18 by-elections were the chance for a range of cranks and eccentrics to have their moment in the sun; newspaper owners were able to plough their own furrows supporting certain challengers; divisions in parties (and in particular the post-1916 divisions within the Liberal Party between the followers of Lloyd George and the Squiffites) were exposed; and a range of issues acquired a dominance as the war continued.

There were, however, various curiosities which would strike the modern activist as strange. There was often a very short campaign timetable. In 1916 in Wimbledon, for example, the sitting MP was elevated to the House of Lords on 10 April, with the by-election timetabled just two days later for polling on 19 April, a campaign

period of only a week. Where there was no contest, such a timetable was not an issue, but for anyone mounting a challenge, it posed significant problems. Nevertheless, campaign rallies were arranged, leaflets printed and endorsements secured at an admirable speed.

The Wimbledon by-election, even with a very short campaign, saw enormous expenditure by the candidates – a combined total of about £400,000 at today's prices.

The established parties had, of course, major advantages over the independent candidates. In the days before universal suffrage, they knew which men were eligible to vote. They could call on their party's full-time agents (over two dozen could take part in the campaign) and committed volunteers. The political rally was a major feature of campaigning, with candidates holding as many as a dozen rallies a day each with a long list of supporting speakers, presumably to give the candidate time to scuttle from one venue to another. And these were not just meetings in a draughty village hall talking to the caretaker and his dog; often thousands would turn up.

The contests gained major newspaper coverage, and not just in the nationals whose owners gave support to their chosen candidates. Local papers covered campaigns in seats far from their base. It is hard to imagine today's Western Morning News giving prominent coverage to an election campaign in Market Harborough, as was the case in 1916.

By-elections are always a chance for a protest about a certain issues and during the war a range of issues dominated the political scene – the nation's defences against Zeppelin attacks, prohibition, conscription and the calling up of married men, "peace by negotiation", and harsher treatment of 'aliens' and a range of single-issue fanatics, egomaniacs and sheer lunatics all revelled in their moment of fame. Leston highlights the idealists, chancers and failed politicians who cropped up – and while their electoral success was limited, they make the subject for an enjoyable read and the book sheds light on a lesser-known aspect of the Great War – the fact that the established parties attempted to put democracy

on hold. It may be the case that without the candidates prepared to oppose the political truce, serious issues would be gone undebated and popular judgement on the Government (particularly the wartime coalition) would have gone unexpressed.

The book might have benefited from an index and an appendix of the election results as well as their inclusion in the text, but these are small quibbles. Leston writes well, with a dry wit and an attention to detail which may prove excessive for the casual reader but which will provide much enjoyment for psephological anoraks like your reviewer.

Nick Winch

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### **Gang of Three Kings Head Theatre by Robert Khan and Tom Salinsky**

Lib Dems of a certain vintage will remember the 'gang of four' who founded the SDP, but this play deals with what came immediately before as the Labour minority government of the mid-1970s staggered hopelessly to its doom amid strikes and rampant inflation.

The play starts with Roy Jenkins having resigned as Labour deputy leader in 1972 after leading 69 MPs to vote with the Tories and Liberals in favour of joining what was then the comms market.

Not for the last time in the play we see Jenkins and Tony Crosland - close friends since Oxford but also political rivals - try and fail to deal with filling a Labour vacancy to keep the left out.

By the time of Harold Wilson's sudden resignation in 1976 they are joined on stage by Denis Healey - also part of their Oxford group and equally incapable of putting ego and personal ambition aside to successfully plot who should become prime minister.

In the event all three of them stood, split their supporters' votes, and handed victory to Jim Callaghan.

Soon after Jenkins left for Brussels and Crosland died suddenly, and at the end we see Jenkins explaining he has given up on Labour and will form the SDP. He invites Healey to join too, which might have altered its fortunes had he done so.

This is necessarily not a play with a lot of action, consisting mainly of three middle aged men shouting at each other as their personal rivalries endlessly get in the way of forming a united moderate position against the rise of Labour's far left.

It is though well acted and its message is clear - politics might have been very different if this trio had put the egos away and been able to collaborate effectively. There is a brief scene of Jenkins and Crosland's alleged gay relationship at Oxford, something alleged by a Jenkins biographer to have happened. Even if true it adds little to the play and suddenly sending the audience back to 1940 in between two scenes in the late 1970s seems pointless.

Probably of most interest to Liberal Democrats is what Jenkins says about forming new party as he furiously enumerates the failings of Callaghan's government and the way it has lost public support and respect both for Labour and the trade unions that finance it.

This was the point David Steel never seemed to understand when he formed the Liberal/ SDP Alliance with the gang of four in 1981.

Although Shirley Williams enjoyed some personal popularity the rest of them did not and whatever the country thought of the new Thatcher government it had decisively rejected the previous Labour one and showed no inclination to have any of its leading figures back in power.

Perhaps the main lesson of the play is that however much politicians may dress up their differences as points of ideological principle, personal rivalries are usually the real cause of the failure of political plots.

Mark Smulian

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**This is only the  
beginning, the making  
of a new left, from anti  
austerity to the fall  
of Corbyn  
by Michael Chessum  
Bloomsbury Academic  
paperback edition 2025**

I opened this book at random on page 199. The author has just, quite rightly, slagged off the Webbs

# THIS IS ONLY THE BEGINNING

## THE MAKING OF A NEW LEFT, FROM ANTI-AUSTERITY TO THE FALL OF CORBYN

MICHAEL  
CHESSUM

BLOOMSBURY

and George Bernard Shaw for speaking positively about aspects of fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, one might add Soviet Russia, without the historical context of whatever they said.

He goes on, "Throughout Labour history, this tradition has provided intellectual ballast and political justification for the methods of various labour leaders of the right, who required top down and centralising methods to deliver manifestos quite at odds with the views of party members."

Need I say more? If the author seriously imagines that anything different would come from Jeremy Corbyn and his acolytes, or the Labour left generally, he is living in cloud cuckoo land. As he states himself on page 230 "Corbynism began as a rebuke to Blairism, but to an extent internalised it's centralised methods. Momentum became a left NGO run by professionals..."

I recall a conversation amongst some of my local Trots when Blair became Labour leader, several of them had just crept back into the party in the laxity following the demise of John Smith; they would simply keep their heads down and await a new opportunity. That came with Jeremy Corbyn, when they reappeared to guide the new recruits that had been inspired.

There is much slagging off of the Liberal Democrats for their role in the coalition government of 2010 to 2015 prior to this - quite rightly so

in the context of tuition fees - but the author neglects or just won't see the positive elements of that involvement.

Historians will generally look back on that period of government as it attempted to meet the challenges of the 2008 economic crash as a period of sanity compared with the nine years of Tory rule that followed. One might look at the environmental agenda for example. Liberal Democrats within the coalition made numerous mistakes - particularly those on the right of the party - allowing themselves to be the public face of bad news, but overall, we entered into the coalition because it was necessary. Would Chessum have preferred the IMF? Labour had dug us into a hole, the litany of mistakes thereafter, most notably Brexit (and I regard Corbyn's Labour as a Leave party, whatever the views of the majority of its members and this goes back to the days of Benn) but clearly the impact of Covid-19 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, raise the question of whether we are out of that hole?

The outcome of the 2015 general election was signed in the Rose Garden in 2010; junior partners in coalitions are generally punished. Had it not been for the Corbyn factor, the Lib Dems might have revived sooner and had a positive impact against the May and Johnson governments, as we hope they will against Starmer.

The Labour party's betrayal of the working class has deep roots, the author is right to place these among the Fabians, but there are other sources.

You cannot be the party of working class if you hold them in contempt; quite why grassroots Labour activists never woke up to this is surprising. Long before the Red Wall, Liberals were making inroads into Labour rotten boroughs; unfortunately, Paddy Ashdown chose to jump into bed with Blair instead. If you want working class self-emancipation and grassroots democracy you have to start with a vehicle that has a libertarian ethos not an authoritarian one, ergo the Liberal Democrats, warts and all. There isn't a perfect vehicle in British politics but it certainly isn't the Labour Party under any hue.

Chessum's conclusions are all

about the Labour Party so are of little interest, except the suggestion that Labour must split and that electoral reform, generally opposed by the Labour Party would be necessary for a new party's or coalition's success. He calls for a commitment to democracy and a belief that transformative change must be driven and owned by the masses, part of Liberal project since at least the 1970s, but I don't think Chessum's our man in this.

Alas, our democracy is top down, and Starmer will make it worse with his local government restructuring. It is for Liberals to go out work in their communities, take and share power with the people. Throughout my political life, people have left the Labour Party joined the Liberals and found it liberating. That is the way forward and is what people of progressive social views should be thinking about and acting on.

Stewart Rayment

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## The Celts a modern history by Ian Stewart Princeton University Press 2025

The problem with books about the Celts is that you never know what you're going to get. In this case it is primarily the growth of Celtic studies from the 18th century onwards and parallel cultural developments rather than going back to the early Iron Age. Stewart is commended for its breadth.

There are disagreements and discontinuities at nearly every stage. Linking the Hallstatt culture to the La Tene has its difficulties, what happened in between? You can take this right up to modern Celticisms in Spain example; Cornish is not the only Celtic language to have died.

Are the French Gauls or Franks or a mixture of both? I struggle to remember sources but some point of the last 20 years of study that suggested that the majority of Irish people probably had a pre-Celtic ancestry, which would tend to suggest, like the La Tene we have a warrior elite coming in and assimilating with a previous community. National pride, there is the Gaulish Celt sack of Rome in the 4th century BCE and so far as Britain is concerned, the



Boudicca revolt is probably our most significant recollection of the Roman occupation.

The great megaliths certainly pre-date the Celts and the druids, though those people were quite capable of creating impressive structures of their own; consider Maiden Castle. The Romans were particularly vindictive towards the druids, massacring them on Mona (Anglesey). That they survived beyond the Roman realms in Scotland and Ireland gives us the myth of Columba turning up on Iona and converting druids to Christianity, recognising the truth of his message and going on to establish an Irish Christian Church which evangelised the east coast of Britain, converting Saxon populations prior to Roman Catholic intervention. Henry VIII of course would fall back on these arguments for his departure from Rome.

The French revolution and Napoleonic period saw a transformation of the Celt as a national phenomenon. We will make mistakes. England had a long standing problem with Ireland as a back door for an invasion, usually by the Spanish or French. This only ever materialised in what was an effect small scale rebellions, perhaps with the exception of James II; easily put down at whatever costs.

However Ireland had been a wider problem throughout English history in so far as it was a prime source of mercenary armies raised by English kings estranged from the nobility from at least Richard II through to James II. Badly paid and badly organised, causing them to live off the land and colouring opinion. How many the wars of British imperialism were fought with the Irish regiments? Post-Reformation, there is a religious element, the Irish being perceived as primarily Catholic, against the primarily Protestant England. Toleration was a long fought out struggle in which the Irish, led about the people like Daniel O'Connell played a major role. This battle was won.

The next big question was Home Rule, the Act of Union had taken away the Irish parliament, which had it remained might have that galvanised Irish industry.

I do not concur with some popular Irish history that the English were responsible for the Famine; at the time the apparatus of the state was simply not available to meet what

was in fact a problem across much of Western Europe exacerbated by the the nature of the Irish agricultural economy and the size of the population it had through support. Tocqueville writes on this, Stewart citing his colleague Beaumont. That said, we could have done better.

The chapter Race, History & the Irish Questions the politics of the limits of anti-Celtic racism, is probably the most interesting to Liberals in terms of its attempts to discuss the issues around Home Rule and its assessment of the responses about some of the leading scholars of the day. I would commend the work of George Watson in respect of Marx and Engels. The chapter on the land question expands on this without specifically mentioning liberal interventions. Nor does the strange survival of the liberalism in Britain in the Celtic fringes feature; that that would be another subject altogether; the reasons partly rested in the non-conformist continuity in post-war Britain in those areas and the personalisation of politics particularly in highland Scotland.

Stewart looks more at the German and French dimensions than most Anglocentric books on the Celts. Gauls notwithstanding, the French government was suppressing the Breton language in the mid-20th century; I'm not sure what the present position is. By contrast, a book I reviewed on Scottish nationalism back in the 1980s stressed very much that the survival the Gaelic language in Scotland owed much more to enlightenment of Whitehall than Saxon Edinburgh, who at the time would probably have suppressed it. The survival and revival of the Welsh language, similarly, is something to be celebrated, Indeed parents struggle to get their children into Welsh language schools.

The survival of Irish Gaelic has been more fraught. De Valera's attempts to revive the language by making all teachers spend some time in Gaeltacht actually led to its decline in those areas. Despite learning it at school, the younger generation of my Irish family speak very little of the native tongue, despite otherwise having a flair for languages.

A fine piece of scholarship going into the controversies of Celt and updating them. Stewart's exposition is clearer than many recent books

on the subject and is thoroughly commended.

Stewart Rayment

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## **Time Runs Like A River by Emma Carlisle Big Picture Press 2024 £12.99**

Continuing the themes of time and nature and a river, Emma Carlisle's book is perhaps for 6 to 10 age range? The children's explorations are their own and there are plenty of guidelines to explore further. I confess that I have never seen a kingfisher, except insofar as I've seen a dark blur and was told it was a kingfisher... I live in hope, but some suspension of reality fits with a children's book. Equally observed as *The World to Come* but a quieter pallet. Together they can form a progression in revealing the concepts of time and nature.

Carlisle works with the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew, for whom she also asks What do you see when you look at a Tree? And answers also in their children's guide (I wonder if it mentions that when Queen Victoria gifted Kew Gardens to the nation she set the admission charge at 1d (0.6p) – I went there on the last day that you could get in for that price, must have been 1973.

Stewart Rayment

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Continued from Page 23

Wendell Berry suggests that the function of *The Objective* - his term for Kingsnorth's Machine - is to eradicate all landmarks, memories and connections to things other than its own worthless and hollow creations, so that "those who wanted to get home would never get there now."

We need a politics that is not oriented towards the uncharted and the far distant but points towards the familiar and the human, that shows us the way home - to a place remembered but not yet realised.

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Jon Egan is a former Labour Party strategist who now works in communications advising charities and community groups

## Monday

The dozy spires of Oxfordshire and the plashy fens of Cambridgeshire are ours. We hold Shropshire from the pubs of Oswestry to the crumbling walls of Ludlow; from the lead mines of Snailbeach to the cliff railway at Bridgnorth. Half a dozen other councils will see Liberal Democrat control after one fashion or another. I played my part in the triumphs of May Day by dispatching parties of Well-Behaved Orphans to deliver in a number of crucial marginal wards. I am pleased this morning when Matron reports that almost all have returned; I suspect it was my promise of ad lib. Tizer at this evening's post-election party. For myself, I shall spend the next few days not taking calls from Freddie or Fiona and enjoying the beauty of Rutland and the Welland Valley. Did you know people are now calling this part of the world "the Notswolds"? The idea being that we have all the beauty of the Cotswolds without the concomitant prices. My only hope is that we don't attract The Wrong Sort.

## Tuesday

When the Liberal Democrat campaign against the 'Family Farm Tax' was launched, I was not greatly interested even when I discovered that we are also opposing inheritance taxes on great landed estates like my own. You see, long ago a leading tax accountant told me that the surest way of not copping for such levies is to avoid dying. Ever since, I have made the annual trip to Hebden Bridge to bathe in the Spring of Eternal Life that bursts from the ground beneath the former headquarters of the Association of Liberal Councillors and paid through the nose for a particular cordial sold by the Elves of Rockingham Forest. My ears pricked up, though, when I heard our MPs forecast dire consequences from the levying of VAT on school fees. I reasoned that if parents had already ruled out keeping their children at home, and were now feeling the pinch, then some might take advantage of the very reasonable terms offered by my own Home for Well-Behaved Orphans. Yet Matron told me at the party last night that we have not gained a single new inmate through this tax. I will confess to feeling Rather Let Down.

## Wednesday

You find me sousing in a deckchair and enjoying the view across my gardens to the moat. Swifts swoop low across the lawn, snapping up insects to feed their young in nests under the eaves of my stables; flocks of hamwees and wheways scuffle noisily, each convinced that the other started it; a volley of bucolic cursing from within a mature shrub tells me that Meadowcroft is hard at work. I have allowed myself a particularly lazy afternoon because I am rather proud of a line I phoned in to Davey's office this morning for use at prime minister's questions. Here's my zinger: "First he came for our steelworkers and carmakers. Now Donald Trump is coming for our world-leading British film industry. Will the PM make it clear to him that if he picks a fight with Commander Gideon, Dr Simon Sparrow and the girls of St Trinian's, he will lose?"

## Thursday

Those bad hats who chopped down the tree at Sycamore Gap are, by all accounts, in for a stiff sentence without the option. I am reminded of the tales told me by

# Lord Bonkers' Diary

colleagues who had been in the House in Mr Gladstone's day. When the Grand Old Man wasn't rescuing fallen women or scourging himself, he was to be found felling trees. The problem was that he didn't confine himself to the woods at Hawarden, but would often attack random trees on his way to speaking engagements. The result was that there were few Liberal MPs of his era who hadn't at one time or another had to sweet talk the local rozzers to secure his release from custody and stump up for tickets for the next police

ball.

## Friday

Sister Sid drops in from the Convent of Our Lady of the Ballot Boxes to lobby me about American tariffs on the Heard and McDonald Islands, where he has relatives. Cook provides us with an excellent fish lunch and is quite unperturbed by Sid's requesting his be served raw. "It's just like that Japanese stooshie you hear so much about," she observes. Later we take a turn by the shore of Rutland Water and watch the small boats come in – ever since Reform took over Lincolnshire, refugees from that county have been landing here. Once ashore, they report themselves to Constable McNally in the village and ask for political asylum, whereupon we put them up at the Bonkers Arms and feed them sausages and plum bread.

## Saturday

What with one thing and another – above all my riding the wave of Rutbeat like a portly surfer – I had a good Sixties, but I do have a regret from that enjoyable decade: my failure to make a television detective out of Jeremy Thorpe. I imagined him storming the beaches of the South Coast by hovercraft to arrest drug smugglers, people traffickers and holidaymakers who had not paid to use their deckchairs. The scripts were written – we hit upon the original idea of making Thorpe a maverick who nevertheless got results – and the show was cast: Peter Bessell as his loyal sidekick; Emlyn Hooson as his boss, who liked things done by the book; Claire Brooks as his housekeeper. All looked good to go, until it came to filming the pilot episode. The weather was terrible, the technical crew was seasick and, in what I now realise was a mordant irony, his craft was put out of action when a dog bit a hole in its skirt.

## Sunday

As the Revd Hughes Went On A Bit at St Asquith's, I have called in at the Bonkers Arms for a restorer before lunch. To my horror, I encounter Freddie and Fiona at the bar. "We've just exchanged contracts on a weekend cottage here," they announce. "We love your Notswolds". Worse than that, Meadowcroft is playing up to them shamelessly, singing folk songs of his own invention and retailing country lore that I for one have never heard before. "If polling day falls when the wheat be green, then turnout will exceed the mean" is just one example. "Oh Mr Meadowcroft, you're so sweet!" exclaims Fiona, kissing his beaming, rubicund face. Feeling suddenly unwell, I make my excuses and leave.

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