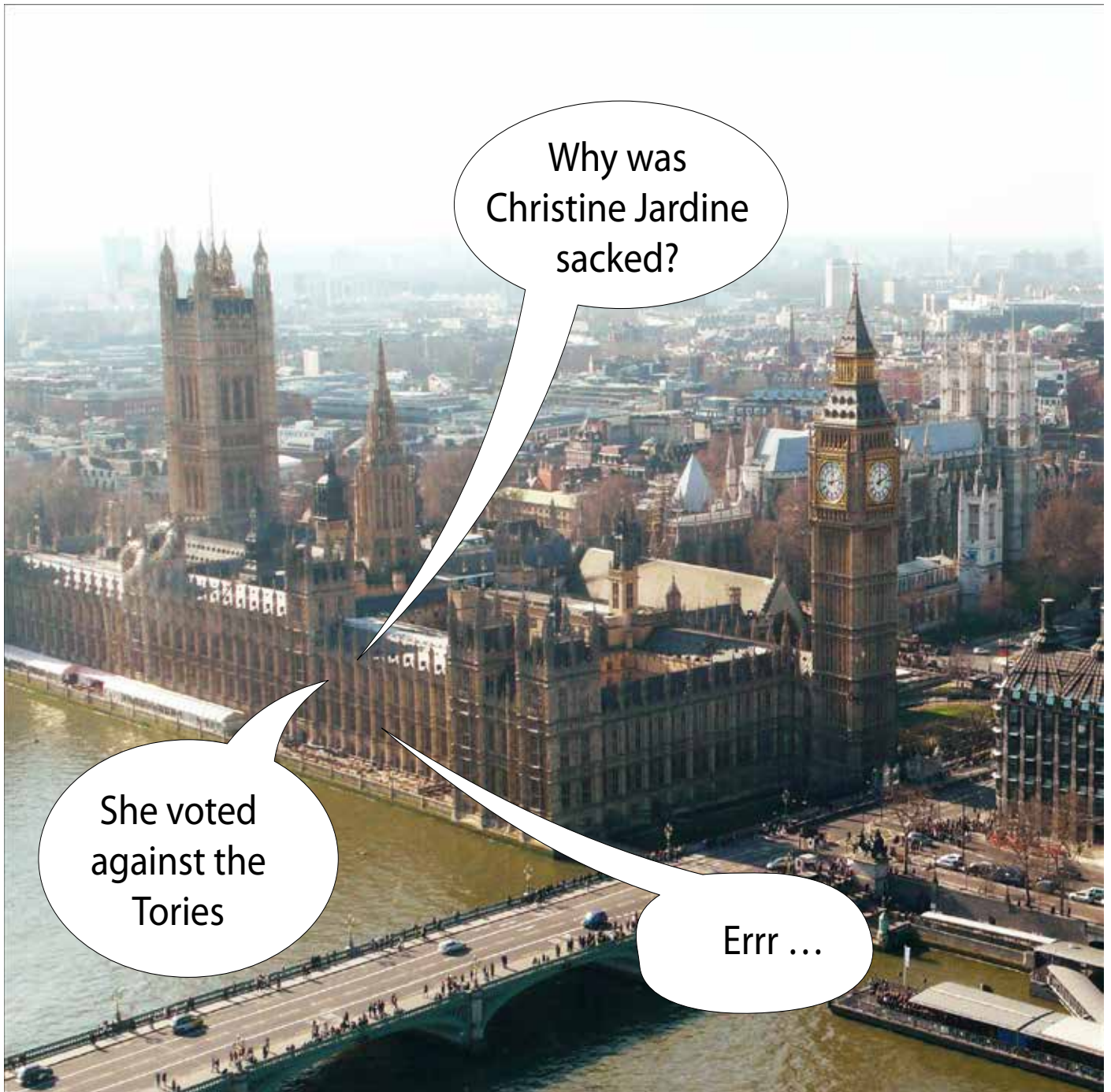


# liberator



- ☛ Dealing with the new transactional voters - Julian Ingram
- ☛ How to fight Reform - Antony Hook and Neil Fawcett
- ☛ Labour's assault on local democracy - Sabah Hamed

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## LIBERATOR

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# COMMENTARY

## LABOUR IN ITS HOLE

History suggests that Liberal Democrats do well in general elections when Labour does too. Although in 2005 Lib Dems profited as Labour slid on the back of the Iraq war, experience in 2024, 2001 and 1997 saw both parties rise.

While the Lib Dems and Labour confront each other in a handful of seats, in many places they rely on each other's tactical voters and on Tories being disaffected for their gains.

It matters to Lib Dems how well the present government does, especially in the face of Reform trying to eclipse the Conservatives. Lib Dem performance will be influenced by how voters see Labour in addition to how they see the party itself.

One year is long enough to start making some judgements about a government and one must be that this one is hopeless at politics.

From the jaw-droppingly unpopular axing of the pensioners' winter fuel allowance (since rescinded in a messy way) to the rebellion on welfare benefits, the Government has been either unable to act without shooting itself in the foot, or even being able to convince its own supporters, or both.

This is dangerous for a Government that depends for its large majority on the support of only 35% of voters and the quirks of first-past-the-post. Labour could quite well have lost on 35% given the unpredictability of results, and could face this next time.

To be fair, Labour has had some international successes by re-engaging with Europe and fending off the worst of Donald Trump's assaults on trade, even at the cost in the latter case of obsequious flattery.

In normal times a Labour Government might be feeling confident faced with the Tories still ineffectively nursing wounds and the Lib Dems' attention almost wholly on Tory seats.

Reform though is the wild card. Its voters come from just about every disaffected group going and, as Carshalton & Wallington MP Bobby Dean explained to London Lib Dems recently, its supporters are neither a Farage fan club nor even necessarily hung up about immigration, but rather are the 'plague on all your houses' voters the Lib Dems used to sometimes get.

This makes fighting Reform less than straightforward. If Labour were able to tell a convincing tale of what it is trying to do and why, support for Reform might reduce. As it is, when people have multiple, unpredictable and even conflicting reasons for backing Reform it becomes harder to craft a counter message.

Possibly the greatest influence on the next general election will be whether Labour digs itself out of the hole into which it chose to leap. Lib Dems have a great interest in the outcome of this.

## NO WAY TO WHIP

The row over the sacking of Christine Jardine as both equalities and Scotland spokesperson (see page 4) is in one way simple but in several others not.

She broke the whip to oppose a Tory amendment rather than abstain as instructed and so was sacked as normally happens when a front bencher breaks the whip.

But why was the whip imposed? The Tory amendment was a vile piece of dog-whistling seeking to withhold welfare payments from those who are foreign and/or suffering 'minor' mental illness.

There was obviously no way the Lib Dems would support this but what was wrong with opposing it?

Official explanations have ranged from the unconvincing to the idiotic. Opposing a Tory wrecking amendment would not mean the Lib Dems supported the Bill itself being passed forthwith - as one explanation said. Nor could opposing the Tories sensibly be called "dancing to the Tories' tune" as another party statement put it.

Given the Government's majority there was not the remotest chance of the amendment succeeding and had the Lib Dems not got themselves into this mess the whole thing would have passed unnoticed.

The real reason for abstaining seems to have been fear that the Tories would issue attack leaflets about the Lib Dems wanting to waste [sic] money on undeserving foreigners.

Well, the Tories can find some excuse to do that anyway if they want to, but do the Lib Dems now so lack confidence that they could not counter this sort of attack?

Is the party really going to spend the next four years having its votes in Parliament dictated by Tory amendments and fear of what the Tories - or for that matter Reform - might say?

Those obsessed by Tory attacks appear oblivious to the possibility of their approach leading to the Lib Dems losing supporters off the other end of the spectrum to Labour, the Greens or even Jeremy Corbyn's new party if the perennially split far left ever gets its act together.

There was reportedly tension between Jardine and Ed Davey even before this vote and her considerable following in the party will want her reinstated eventually.

The real issue from this episode is whether the Lib Dems are able and willing to fight the Tories rather than fold in the face of a feared attack.



# RADICAL BULLETIN

## WHIPPING POST

A whipping decision widely viewed in the party as both deplorable and inexplicable has seen Christine Jardine booted out of the equalities and Scotland spokesperson roles amid a storm of protest from every corner of the Lib Dems.

His treatment of Jardine has seen Ed Davey achieve the remarkable feat of antagonising in one go many MPs and peers, LGBT+ activists, Scots, ethnic minorities, women and 100 signatories to an open letter.

Relations between Davey and Jardine are thought to have been poor over trans rights, where she wanted him to more robustly oppose the Supreme Court ruling.

But the trouble started over a Tory amendment to deny disability benefits to those with - undefined - 'minor' mental health problems and to foreign nationals. It also called for a white paper on implementing Tory proposals.

There was never the remotest chance of this passing, but Lib Dem MPs were whipped to abstain. This was unacceptable to Jardine, who explained in a letter to Davey that her late husband was bipolar. "Several people around me have mental health conditions the amendment dismissed as 'minor', and not worthy of support. I could not in good conscience do anything other than vote against another Conservative attempt to remove help from those who need it the most."

By not resigning, Jardine forced Davey to either sack her or accept a spokesperson breaking the whip. Her sacking was no doubt intended as a warning to others.

The amendment was also too much for some backbenchers. Freddie van Mierlo explained that his father would have been denied benefits under it, and Wera Hobhouse and Manuela Perteghella had similar objections. They were joined in opposing the amendment by Lee Dillon, Andrew George, Tom Gordon, Rachel Gilmour and Cameron Thomas.

The ostensible reasons for the whip were given in a message to parliamentarians from work and pension spokesperson Steve Darling, though who actually wrote it is a matter for conjecture.

Darling told MPs and peers: "Voting for the amendment meant backing the Conservatives' conditions, and obviously we couldn't do that. But voting against meant saying the bill should be implemented in full without delay, and we couldn't do that either."

This left recipients bemused. How can voting against a Tory amendment mean that the Lib Dems want the rest of the Bill - which they have opposed and continue to - passed 'without delay'? Nothing would stop them from voting against it, and the Tory amendment was doomed anyway.

The real reason for the whip emerged only slowly

- fear of Tory attack leaflets saying, paraphrased somewhat, "the Lib Dems opposed us stopping your money going to scrounging foreigners".

Quite apart from an abstention allowing the Tories to do this anyway 'the Lib Dems failed to support...' has the party really lost its nerve to the extent that it doesn't feel confident in countering this sort of racist dog whistle?

Jardine has complained that she found out she had been sacked from the media, not by anyone telling her to her face.

The whole thing has left anger directed at the coterie around Davey, which is blamed for this colossal cock-up.

There are rising murmurs about parliamentarians who object to being dictated to by the Daveybunker. All leaders sooner or later get into a bunker, and it never ends well.

Meanwhile, Jardine's Scotland job went to Susan Murray and the equalities job to Lisa Smart, in addition to her carrying on as both home affairs spokesperson and chair of the parliamentary party.

Some wonder if the chair should be held by someone dependent on Davey's patronage for their spokesperson role, rather than by a backbencher. Smart is expected to stand down as chair in the autumn.

## WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The row over alleged racist language between the Parliamentary Candidates Association (PCA) and the Liberal Democrat Campaign for Race Equality (LDCRE) may have been resolved, at least once agreement can be reached on what terminology to use in the place of 'BME' or "BAME".

This began (Liberator 429) when 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 reference to 'two tiers' infuriated LDCRE chair Rod Lynch, who told his members Hope's message talked of "ethnic minority candidates in racist derogatory terms" and complained to the Federal Board (FB).

It is disputed what Hope actually meant. The PCA objected to what it thought was Lynch's wish to fast track ethnic minority candidates bypassing the normal approval process. Lynch says he simply sought to encourage suitable people to come forward.

Faced with an accusation of racism most of the PCA board was understood to be ready to resign if this was upheld by the FB.

If this had included David Crowther, PCA vice-chair, things would have been awkward as he is the most senior retuning officer in the party, and elections for various federal bodies are due.

In the event, the FB told the PCA to apologise and distribute a message from Amna Ahmad, the vice president responsible for working with ethnic minority communities, setting out what the party is doing to improve the ethnic diversity of candidates.

This has been held up while someone somewhere decides on the terminology to use as BME and BAME have fallen from favour. One suggestion was 'global majority' but that also proved unacceptable.

The PCA was told those who craft its messages must undergo inclusive language training.

## **TWO, THREE, TEN**

Can the 'F10' reforms to the Lib Dem candidates process be voted on again after the English Council failed to give them the required two-thirds majority support, leaving it unadopted in what is by far the party's largest component?

Although F10 was passed overwhelmingly at Harrogate spring conference and has been accepted by Wales (Scotland is yet to vote), the English decision has consigned it to a limbo where its status is unclear.

Some believe it cannot be voted on again soon because of the rule (or convention as others see it) that the same business cannot come back before conference for three years.

Others argue that since the English Council was being asked to cede powers over candidates to the federal level, the vote concerned neither policy nor a constitutional amendments and so the 'three years rule' does not apply.

Meanwhile, the rather large group of volunteers who run the candidates process - some of whom were likely to have resigned were England to have adopted F10 - is happily proceeding with selections as though nothing has happened.

Some 13 new returning officers have been trained in the new (and shorter) selection rules and target seats including Hampstead & Highgate and Bermondsey & Old Southwark now have prospective candidates in place and 10 new candidates have recently been approved.

Meanwhile those who brought F10 forward, which includes Tim Farron, Ed Davey and Mark Pack, must try to find a way to rescue it.

This looks complicated. There are even disputes about what was disputed at the English Council meeting and over who was clear or unclear about what, which can hardly be helpful.

One thing F10 is supposed to do is make it easier for the party at federal level to find more candidates so that - at least in theory - every seat gets a choice of candidate.

Whether in practice there will be a rush of people to be sacrificial lambs in hopeless fourth places remains to be seen, and in some of these local parties it must be questionable whether there are enough active members to hold a sensible contest.

## **QUICK GETAWAY**

Sutton & Cheam MP Luke Taylor found the audience for his closing remarks at London Lib Dems' summer forum reduced by one, as former Southwark & Bermondsey MP Simon Hughes could be seen hurriedly leaving as Taylor took the stage.

Southwark members were informed by Hughes that he did not want to be present for Taylor's speech.

Taylor replaced David Campanale as candidate for Sutton & Cheam last year and Hughes - along with the Lib Dem Christian Forum - is supporting Campanale's legal action over the matter (Liberator 429) in which he claims religious discrimination (see letters page 22).

## **TRUTH UNTO POWER**

Liberator and the prominent lawyer and party grandee Philip Goldenberg have not always seen eye to eye, but he deserves congratulations for signing a public letter condemning the Netanyahu government.

For his pains, Goldenberg has been sent a 'letter of criticism' by the Board of Deputies of British Jews for signing the letter and suspended from membership of that body for publicly promoting it.

The letter was sent to the Financial Times and noted: "Israel's soul is being ripped out and we, members of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, fear for the future of the Israel we love and have such close ties to.

"Silence is seen as support for policies and actions that run contrary to our Jewish values."

Goldenberg said in a signed article in Liberal International British Group's InterLib magazine [[www.libg.co.uk/interlib](http://www.libg.co.uk/interlib)]: "I am a Zionist. I love Israel - the state, the land, and its people. But my Israel is the one conceived by Herzl and designed by Weizmann - a pluralist liberal democracy upholding Jewish ethical values.

"Sadly at present it has a government which instead runs by the Trump playbook: denigrating the country's judges, firing senior civil servants, attacking media outlets which express disagreement, and creating hate figures out of those who oppose it. It was Hitler's playbook too."

He said he had not initially opposed Israel's retaliation in Gaza for the Hamas attacks in October 2023.

But Israel's resumption of fighting after the ceasefire "was a cynical attempt to cling to power at the cost of bringing back a racist bigot into Government. Other options on the table could have resulted in all the hostages being returned. Instead, it seems as if they have been abandoned."

## **TOWER OF BABEL**

The Mitcham and Morden Commemorative Gold Toilet is heading to Harrow for the worst motion submitted for conference.

Harrow's sentiments in 'increased use of online debates' are fine, the problem is what these debates would be. It called for those motions not taken solely due to lack of time to be debated online instead.

By whom, and at what? If motions were debated outside of conferences, who could attend and what status would they have if passed?

# WE'RE IN THE SERVICE SECTOR

Politics has changed, with transactional voters looking at what parties can provide, and with little traditional loyalty. How should the Lib Dems respond asks Julian Ingram

UK politics in the second half of the 20th century was relatively stable, class and competence based. Short term exceptions were absorbed back into the norm by the power of the electoral system. But politics always operates in and reflects a changing world. Sometimes its ahead of the curve, sometime behind but it's always changing.

In the 21st century we see the rise of popularism, authoritarianism and the hollowing out of the centre, often linked to the loss of patience to deal effectively with critical issues.

The political system increasingly is unable to address them directly, quickly and honestly, for example, the Post Office Horizon scandal.

Why? Well, voters are consumers as well, while they have always been transactional in the purchase of goods and services its clear that their service expectations have increased over time. As these increased expectations have transferred to politics, they find the system totally lacking in its ability to deliver instant value in the same way Amazon can deliver tens of thousands of products, individually, in 24 hours.

Transactional value depends on product quality, choice, price and of course great service. There is also the element of brand and how it relates to you and your values.

For example, when we use retail supermarket brands, we know what a Waitrose or Marks & Spencer brand offer is versus a Tesco or an Aldi or Lidl. We perhaps less well understand Morrisons, Asda and the once mighty Sainsbury brand.

## HYBRID SHOPPERS

They are all competing in the same market although with geographic local strengths and weaknesses. It has given rise to hybrid shoppers who will happily transact with one brand for premium products, another for household staples and another because its wines are amazing. They all have a different range of transaction value based on how relevant quality, choice, price, service are to your immediate needs.

Applying this consumer model to the perception of British political parties reveals a major decline in perceived service. Voters increasingly feel there is a lack of competence in delivering the basics – the 'broken Britain' mantra. This is combined with a view of many that a small group get richer on our backs. It has led, inevitably, to voters seeking to try other alternatives which has in turn led to fragmentation, disengagement and inevitable volatility.

I believe technology has helped exacerbate this by

widening the gap between the reality of everyday service expectations, consistently delivered on time and political service delivery - never delivered on time, always over cost and rarely fit for purpose.

It's interesting to see that price comparison websites - a market dominated by four players - are used by 85% of adults, 40% in the last 12 months. Enabling them to find the best deal and then transact in real time – 'Simplz.' People are used to things being delivered quicker. They also have much more opportunity to hear about other people's experience through social media, and one poor review is as powerful as ten good reviews. Yet politics and the public sector still take years to deliver little. No wonder voters are looking for a better transaction that delivers better value.

Due to the complexities of constituencies, which is analogous to the retail supermarket brands local strengths and weaknesses, the averaging of national polls is becoming somewhat meaningless and the MRP seat polls show how our electoral system is magnifying this volatility.

Savvy voters are understanding the power of bar charts to choose who they transact with. But what happens when that choice fails them? The temptation is to choose the anti-establishment option and history tells us that rarely ends well.

So if that's the why, then how do we respond? Attacking the competition does not solve the issue of perceived (in)competence. Rather Lib Dems need a reason why a voter should transact with us. Three things are key here:

- \* Our delivery, delivery, delivery. The proof that we can deliver change.

- \* Not promising what you can't deliver. Being honest and focusing on small but important symbolic issues.

- \* What our brand stands for and how that relates to a large enough segment of voters and their values. If you can get your brand to be known for an issue that relates to your voters, then the combination of delivery and message salience will help drive customer/voter attraction.

Politics today is facing an identity crisis because the voters don't know what all the brands stand for. It was easy when there were two plus a challenger now its five or six. They are all seen as poor at delivery, - promising much delivering little and blaming others for their failings - many lack emotional connection and would rather play Punch and Judy than tackle the difficult issues we face.

The Tories increased taxes and had record immigration, Labour cut benefits and I doubt many people have any idea what we stand for. Reform as

the outside challenger has a short-term advantage here “we are not like the others”. But, as their local government success starts to reveal chaos rather than delivery, they are going to face disillusionment from those transaction voters who gave them a chance.

## **COUNCILS’ ROLES**

Here is the clear role for councils under our control.

While we can and should hold the government to account its likely that multiple stories about us delivering on the ground are the source of leverage and they can even be linked to the increasingly odd stunt.

Having sensible, well thought through, honest answers, simply articulated on their priority issues is vitally important to transactional voters. That is how you challenge the Reform populist BS and give them a better reason to transact with us. It’s also the way to build a coherent narrative that can associate our brand with the issues that matter to the many.

With the above analysis it’s easier to see why we can take on Reform and Farage better than Labour or the Tories. After all quite a few transactional voters experimenting with Reform have voted for us in the past and we do seem to already be able to present a better alternative based on principal authority by-elections in areas where we are strong.

Importantly we need to remember that Reform voters are not reform activists; they are people who feel ignored, know the system isn’t working and want a non-conformist solution. They are worried for themselves and their families. Exactly the people we reached out to with community politics to rebuild our party 50 years ago.

But, if we are to really offer a good reason for transactional voters to try us, rather than Reform, we need to follow a simple mantra of: credible solutions to the issues that worry them; clearly and simply articulated – cut the jargon; without over promising; not making vacuous meaningless statements like ‘action to cut the cost of living’; focusing on areas we can find common ground and common values.

*“Politics and the public sector still take years to deliver little. No wonder voters are looking for a better transaction that delivers better value”*

Only then can we build a clear understanding of what we stand for as a brand. Only then can you credibly ask the simple question “Do you want to risk Farage as your next PM?” and expect a reasoned non knee jerk response. This approach will also help the soft Conservatives who have left the Tories over fears of competence, and give Labour tactical voters the reason to switch when needed.

Finally an understanding of transactional voters will almost certainly need a rethink on some of our campaigning techniques.

So, our canvass scripts might need to adapt. How we record voter intentions seems out of step with the increased volatility. It’s issues not prior party allegiances that define voters.

Another example is that we can see in data that Reform has got non-voters out to vote while others who might normally have voted stayed at home. This also has an impact on our content/messaging. Interestingly, credible bar charts might be one constant.

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Julian Ingram is a member of Chesham & Amersham Liberal Democrats. He is a former parliamentary candidate and from 1996 to 2010 ran the Liberal Democrat research and polling operation.

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# SQUEEZING REFORM OUT OF OXFORDSHIRE

Reform won just one seat in Oxfordshire as battles between other parties denied them any space. Neil Fawcett explains how it was done

The Liberal Democrats gained control of Oxfordshire County Council for the first time in its 50 year existence on 1 May

We won 36 seats, up 16 from 2021 and our highest number ever. The Tories, who had run the council from 2005-21, were reduced to a rump of just 10. Labour won 12 and the Greens seven. Reform won only one seat.

The roots of this success go back more than 10 years. Following the loss of Oxford West & Abingdon (OxWAb) constituency in the 2010 general election, and a mulling in the 2011 district council elections, a group of OxWAb activists made a conscious decision that we would aim to win OxWAb back.

Work started to revive campaigning activity across OxWAb and a detailed plan drawn up for the 2015 general election. This focused on recruiting members, deliverers and poster sites and on building a strong campaign structure across the seat.

A series of strong local by-election gains gave the team momentum and the selection of Layla Moran as our parliamentary candidate in November 2012 gave us someone to unite behind.

Small gains in the 2013 county council elections added more momentum and resources and the team went into the 2015 election in high spirits. And lost. Badly.

The 2015 election was followed by a rush of new members. We organised a series of workshops and training days to try and get them active, which worked well. Both in OxWAb, and in other Oxfordshire seats, we had a lot of keen new activists with a will to win.

Then came Brexit. We organised a strong, Lib Dem badged, campaign across Oxfordshire with the then six local parties working well together. We delivered a huge amount of literature, got a decent poster display up, and picked up more members and activists as we went.

The win for Leave led to even more people coming forward and we ran more events to bring new members into activity.

Soon after the referendum, David Cameron resigned as the MP for Witney. We'd come fourth in the 2015 general election, and had councillors in only two wards in the constituency. It didn't look like a fantastic opportunity.

But we got stuck in quickly. We mapped out a basic campaign plan and focused activity in the small number of wards with any recent Lib Dem history and on the areas in Witney and Chipping Norton that had a decent Labour vote.

Liz Leffman was selected as the candidate on the Tuesday evening, as we got back from conference, and

was out with Tim Farron at Chipping Norton market on the Wednesday morning.

## VIRTUAL HQ

The campaign grew and grew. The Facebook 'Virtual HQ' really took off, particularly the thread each day about what to name the toilets! New members turned up in droves, particularly from across Oxfordshire. Liz ended up coming a strong second.

We'd given the whole party a positive experience and a load of momentum, and we'd tried out some new campaign techniques using the still relatively new Connect system.

From there we went on to make gains in every round of local elections, to get Layla elected in OxWAb in June 2017, and to then win control of four of the five districts in turn.

This provided the credibility and capacity to gain four more parliamentary seats in July 2024, at least in the circumstances of that election.

Going into the 2025 county council elections, we were in the strongest position across Oxfordshire that we had ever been.

Our strategy was simple.

We positioned ourselves as the only party that could stop the Tories across the county and aimed to actively fight the Tories in as many of our and their seats that our resources would stretch to.

Our message was simple too: Positive promotion of the division candidate, presenting them as the champion of their local community; the choice is between the Lib Dems, who are investing in front line services and protecting our environment, and the Conservatives, who had cut vital services and screwed up the finances; a relentless squeeze on the Labour and Green vote.

Seats held by each party before the election were 20 Lib Dems against 19 Tories – pretty much the perfect bar chart!

In retrospect, I think the strength of our squeeze message was one of the reasons why Reform struggled to break through. By convincing people that their choice was between us and the Tories, I suspect we limited Reform's ability to break through.

Our literature was consistently bright and colourful with a big emphasis on large cheerful photos of the candidate with others and a low word count.

Having elected five MPs the year before, their campaigning featured heavily in our literature too, and turned out to be a massive positive factor on the doorstep.

We drew up a list of potential target seats more than a year before the election. Boundary changes (which



we had worked hard on) meant that a lot more county seats mirrored district wards we had done well in.

We tiered the seats, Tier 1 was seats we held solidly already, plus a few where we had won them comprehensively in recent district elections.

Tier 2 were the potentially winnable seats, either close seconds the previous time or places we'd started to make some progress in district elections. Tier 3 were the unwinnables – places where we'd had no success or where there was clearly a battle going on between two other parties.

The list this left us with gave us about 45 potentially winnable seats out of 69 on the Tier 1 and 2 lists. This was the vast majority of seats in our five held constituencies. It also meant that there were hardly any seats where there wasn't a contest between two parties. I'm sure this is another reason why Reform didn't do well.

We've been working in a coordinated way across Oxfordshire for some time. We hold regular meetings of the Oxfordshire Coordinating Committee which brings together local party chairs, candidates/MPs, council group leaders and campaign leads and staff.

This group oversaw the approval and selection process, the targeting plan and campaign plan. It is a strategic group, rather than a 'doing' committee, but does ensure that leading Lib Dems across the county are broadly on the same page.

The detail was all put together by our excellent campaign manager, Richard Buckley, who worked to help the local parties and organisers deliver the campaign on the ground.

We had a joint literature plan in the run up to the elections. This saved time and money, and helped maintain a consistent message.

We coordinated door-knocking, with tailored plans depending on the circumstances in each seat. In many of our Tier 1 seats we pretty much knew where our vote came from and the campaign was targeted to hold that support and turn it out.

In Tier 2 seats that was much more of a mix. In some we had a good base of data and just needed to get enough more. In some rural divisions we had to work out which villages to focus effort on and which to take a more tightly targeted approach.

We make good use of Connect's data modelling, combined with our own data and box count information.

Campaign staff across the county also worked closely together. There is a weekly Zoom call between them, coordinated by Richard and our campaign manager from campaigns department, Andy Briggs.

We ran a countywide approach to approval and selection, with the aim of selecting early and maintaining consistency. The local parties had different levels of previous experience of this process, and there were a few challenges in getting everyone to follow the same process. We did end up with quite a few late selections, some of which led to us doing less well than we could have in a few seats.

We followed the ALDC model approach as far as

*"The strength of our squeeze message was one of the reasons why Reform struggled to break through"*

possible and I'd recommend that to all local parties.

We held regular Zoom calls with the candidates, and issues each of them with a booklet that told them about the campaign plan, deadlines for material for leaflets etc.

Nearly every candidate worked really hard throughout the campaign. We lost one along the way, and this

unfortunately didn't leave his successor enough time to get fully up and running and they lost narrowly.

We put a massive emphasis on our poster campaign. We've had a long tradition in OxWab of working hard in the run up to elections to get supporters to sign up to give advance permission for us put a poster up on their property.

## MASSIVE DISPLAY

This approach came into its own during the general election when we achieved a truly massive post display across the five constituencies we won.

We did the same this time round, and had several hundred sites identified in advance.

This approach strengthens the squeeze message and provides a sense of momentum. I'm sure this was also a factor in squeezing Reform out.

It's interesting to note that, in the Didcot South seat that Reform did win, they had a very impressive poster display.

I'm conscious that we are in a very fluid period in UK politics. I'm also aware that what we achieved was easier to pull off in a generally Remain leaning, well educated place like Oxfordshire.

But some things will apply everywhere.

Start early. The earlier you start planning, the more you'll get done overall. The earlier you select candidates, the more time they'll have to build their profile and campaign on local issues.

Have a clear strategy and firm targeting. Decide early on what your objectives are and which seats you are targeting. Focus all your effort on the seats you can win.

Work as a team. Coordinate and communicate between local parties. Have regular campaign calls and get together. Encourage everyone to help in the places it's most needed. The aim is to maximise the number of seats we win, not the size of your own majority.

Keep the message simple. Promote individual candidates as the local champion for the area and draw a clear contrast between our position on the key issues and our primary opponents.

Squeeze, squeeze, squeeze. We are the party that the largest number of people will consider voting for, and if you convince them that the choice is between you and your main opponent you will always win a pile of extra votes as a result.

None of this is rocket science. In fact it's pretty much the same way we've been winning seats for the more than three decades I've been campaigning for the party.

It's also, as far as I can see, the most effective way to keep Reform out.

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Neil Fawcett is Liberal Democrat deputy leader of Oxfordshire County Council

# WE CAN BEAT REFORM

## Reform's bunch of bizarre obsessives surprised by taking control of Kent County Council, but they can be defeated by community politics, says Antony Hook

In May, the Liberal Democrats doubled our size on Kent County Council and became the official opposition. Conservative control ended and Reform took power with 57 of 81 seats.

Kent is England's largest county council and largest local authority by many measures. Its population is around 1.6m and expected to approach 2.0m by the end of the decade. It has coastline on three sides and a mix of communities. The longstanding commuter belt has grown with HS1, which provides a domestic service on high-speed lines built for the Channel Tunnel. There are fairly rural areas, the cathedral city of Canterbury with its three universities, a mixture of small-medium sized coastal towns and inland market towns which vary between affluent, poor and mixed.

The Port of Dover and Channel Tunnel (and a panoply of businesses associated with them) are major employers in the east and made possible by the close proximity of France, while the west of the county has stronger economic links to London. Income and education levels are slightly below the south east average.

Politically the county's history is strongly Conservative. Maps of the 1906 election show Kent staying mostly Tory blue despite the Liberal gold landslide across Britain. However, about half the county's MPs went Labour 1997-2010 and a similar result followed in 2024.

Apart from Orpington - then in Kent - there was no Liberal / Liberal Democrat MP in Kent from 1945, until Mike Martin's sensational win in Tunbridge Wells in 2024. The county council covered Medway until 1999 and large parts of what is now south east London.

The county council has been Conservative for most of the time since its creation in 1890 apart from a Lib Dem – Labour coalition in 1993-97.

In May 2021, the Conservatives retained control with a large majority, following national trends and helped by a vaccine bounce and before the unedifying collapses of Johnson and Truss.

Prior to Rachel Reeves' unpopular moves in the summer and autumn of 2024, the Labour group entertained ideas of becoming the largest party. The Greens went into 2025 talking of increasing their four seats to 15-20 (including designs to gobble up ours, apparently).

Kent Conservatives briefed journalists they realistically hoped to retain control with a small majority, or just short of a majority. The view of most Liberal Democrats was that we would increase our seats and the council would go into no overall control. Senior council officers have told me they prepared for two scenarios: Conservative

continuation or a 'rainbow coalition'.

In February 2025, council officers organised a 'find out about becoming a councillor' public event, which included me and the other group leaders as speakers. There were a large number of attendees including a few former Conservative MPs or their spouses. By far the largest group of attendees were supporters of Reform UK, identifiable by their turquoise ties and badges.

The Q&A sessions were startling. Whatever the topic, the Reform members asked about immigration and asylum. When the council's challenging financial situation was discussed they demanded to know how much was being spent on asylum seekers.

### REFUGEE CHILDREN

It was explained that Kent's considerable expenditure on refugee children (the county becomes the social services authority for unaccompanied children who land by boat) is eventually refunded by government and adult refugees are the responsibility of the Home Office from the outset. But the Reform attendees generally refused to accept this and insisted that the council's challenges could not be from the adult social care burden of an ageing population but must be, somehow, from immigration.

When the election came most observers expected a sizeable Reform Group of 20-30 seats. There were mixed messages as to whether the Conservatives were planning a post-election coalition with them.

Reform's election campaign was expensive, not local and sadly effective. Most households in Kent received about three addressed letters in the post. These were from Farage with friendly images of him (e.g petting a labrador, wearing a pink shirt in repose against a pastoral landscape) and popular messages about a need for change, exaggerated reference to council debts and "stopping the boats".

There mailshots costs millions but they won't show up on election expenses as the letters did not mention candidates or even the date of polling day.

In addition, there was a lot of online campaigning that we did not necessarily see. As well as social media adverts targeted to certain groups, many online fora have voices who repeat Reform messages. There is some evidence that these drove votes from many people who do not usually vote, and some marked register analysis is needed to quantify this.

Reform won over two-thirds of the seats as the Conservatives and Labour collapsed and the Greens stalled. The Leader and entire Cabinet lost their seats. Liberal Democrats doubled our seats with a gain in Canterbury and five in Tunbridge Wells.

The Lib Dem group is not as vast as the Reform Group but unlike them, every member of our group wanted to win and planned to become a county councillor. We also have a high level of professional skill and experience in the Lib Dem Group. Trudy Dean was elected for the eleventh time.

Our group also has a former army major, two practising lawyers, two chartered accountants and a former Financial Times journalist, among others.

The Lib Dem Group are now by far the most experienced as members of the council.

The council went into an effective hiatus for three weeks as officers sought to brief and train dozens of new members. It was immediately clear Reform members did not know what the role of the council was. They asked about “stopping housing development”, unaware that type of planning sits with the district councils. It also became apparent that the Reformists are diverse on a traditional left-right axis. Some express uber-Thatcherite views and their leadership group appears to be from a mostly conservative-ish background but at an early briefing on adult social care some expressed Corbyn-esque outrage that profit is made by care homeowners or that service users can choose to buy different levels of accommodation.

## NUREMBERG RALLY

The annual council took place on 22 May and was extraordinary. It was compared to a Nuremberg Rally by one senior council officer. The Reform group were festooned in party regalia. They gave their leader an ovation, often standing, every time she answered a question. The council’s chair and vice-chair are usually nominated with non-political speeches involving a few amusing personal anecdotes, reflecting the politically neutral, civic nature of their roles. That was history as Reform members made triumphalist speeches about “Turquoise Revolution” and “making Nigel Farage prime minister.”

Thereafter effective governance stopped again. Officers had prepared a calendar of meeting dates before the election. One might understand the new administration adjusting these dates but instead they cancelled every substantive meeting in June. By the end of July most committees will have had one or zero meetings since the election.

One of Reform’s early announcement was the ban the Pride flag and Ukraine flag from county hall. The latter had been in the chamber since the Russian invasion and support for Ukraine united all parties in the previous council. The leader declared the council will now only fly the flags of the UK, England and Kent and flags “connected to the armed forces or Royal Family.” She said our British and English identity “is the one that matters.”

The Reform leader is dismissive of committee meetings. She has attended very few (whereas the past two Conservative leaders would attend many). When she has come it has been to evade answering a few questions then leave quickly. Her responses to

*“The strength of our squeeze message was one of the reasons why Reform struggled to break through”*

questions usually involve phrases like, “you will find out when the time is right”.

She has a media background and the Reform UK HQ press office take a close, active interest in Kent.

At the beginning of June the leader jointly with Farage and Zia Yousuf announced the creation of a Kent ‘Department of

Government Efficiency (DOGE). This was done on social media on a Sunday night with no prior warning to the council’s chief executive or other senior officers. .

The next day, Yusuf, Arron Banks and others arrived, allowed in as visitors to the leader and presented a shopping list of information requests in response to which the council has taken legal advice. For now, they have only been provided with information disclosable under the Freedom of Information Act but I understand have asked for more than that.

There is huge public concern about the privacy of personal data. In addition, Yousuf has taken to tweeting demonstrably false, invidious claims about what he has supposedly uncovered.

The worst of these was perhaps a claim that KCC buys TV licences for asylum seekers. In reality, KCC helps care-leavers prepare for adult life and in a few cases that has involved paying for their TV licence, last year about three of these care leavers were former refugee children. As someone once said, “how do you work with these truth twisters?”

In mid-July the leader created a false story about trans books. She Tweeted a claim that a trans book had on her orders been removed from the children’s section of a library, and other books “poisoning the minds of our children” would be removed too. This was patently untrue. The book she used a picture of was a handbook of advice for trans autistic adults. It was in the display section with other pride-themed books at Herne Bay library. It was never in the children’s section. The professional head of the library service put in writing that there was no new policy and no volumes are being removed.

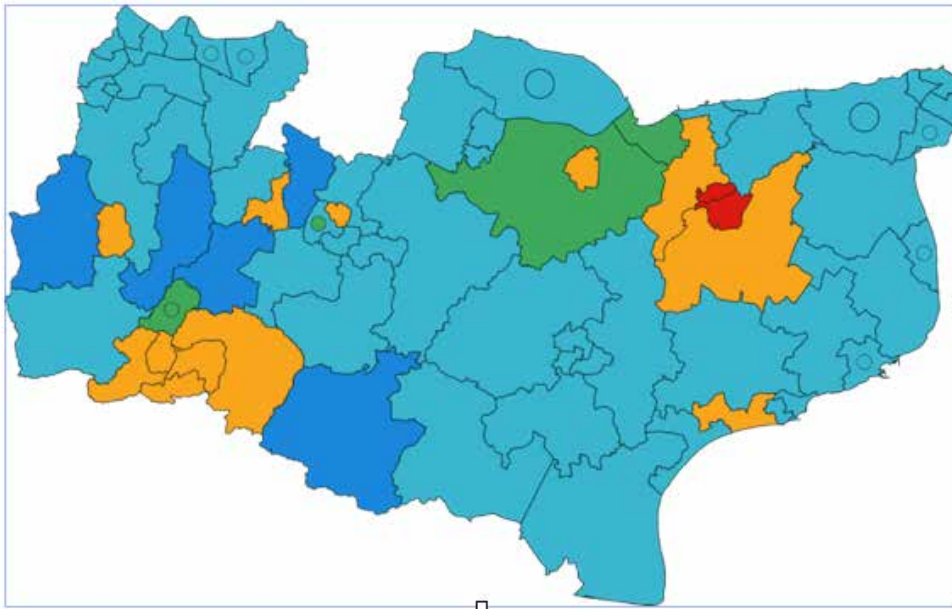
The Guardian and local media understood the story and reported this farrago for what it was. Other papers, such as The Times ran erroneous “Reform ban trans books from children’s shelves” stories which they did not correct even after the true picture was pointed out to them.

It has been suggested that this was all to distract from one of the Reform councillors appearing in court later in the week charged with domestic violence offences.

Farage came to county hall at the beginning of the month to announce that Reform would oppose Local Government Reform (but not creation of mayors) and would look to cut home to school transport. In a largely rural county like Kent Farage’s words have caused concern among many parents. After Farage left, the Reform cabinet member for highways was sacked. He has hit out at a dishonest press release that said he left voluntarily and has said the Reform leader is focussed on headlines not delivery.

A second full council took place on 10 July 2025. The agenda, like that of committee meetings, was





offered by Reform as reasons not to make the system more generous to people in need.

The Reform members are varied but they appear to be driven by this palette of attitudes:

- ☛ obsession with asylum and immigration and a propensity to link every other issue back to these;
- ☛ a scarcity based view of the world;
- ☛ belief that fraud is embedded in most things;
- ☛ things should be torn down, without saying (or thinking?) what comes next;
- ☛ the general election is all that really matters and the council is a platform for get media hits.

astonishingly thin. The Reform administration can table as many items they want but there was nothing on the council budget or any of the services the council provides.

They tabled one paper – on councillors pay. They proposed a 5% cut in our allowances and appeared disappointed that all parties supported this (a Green-Lib Dem amendment having unsuccessfully proposed something similar in 2024). A Lib Dem amendment to the Reform paper protected an allowance for members who are carers.

The Reform leader's focus was her oral report to council, which was mostly about asking government to do things (like give the council a share of proceeds from the Dartford Crossing) or a food and drink event to somehow encourage Eurostar to resume stops at Ebbsfleet and Ashford (which did not survive the end of the Brexit transition and longer immigration checks, not conducive to running a railway) rather than things the council does itself.

The Green group tabled a motion on violence against women and girls and we had a motion of blue badge parking permits. Reform voted down the Green motion and amended ours to remove the meaningful parts.

Speeches of Reform members in both debates were shocking. They made constant references to asylum seekers, immigrants, “unenlightened cultures” and trans people. The implication was that these groups are the root cause of violence against women and girls, despite the evidence or “common sense” (a phrase the Reform members use often) of most of us the violence against women and girls is not an issue to see primarily through a racial lens.

The Blue Badge debate was equally shocking. Our motion was to support a campaign to make rules more flexible so badges may also be issued to people with significant mobility problems that may last less than three years (for example, some cancer patients). Reform members expressed “drawbridge up” attitudes (“my uncle has a blue badge, I don’t want more people to have one”) and suggested that the blue badge system is riddled with fraud. One member said blue badges should be scrapped entirely while others complained of lack of enforcement, visitors from outside the county using blue badges, and disabled spaces being too few in number, all of which were

I have no doubt that Reform are going to be terrible for Kent and would be terrible in government. I think most Liberals underestimate, not overestimate, the severity of what Reform would do in power nationally.

## REFORM BEATABLE

But they are beatable. In the May election there were 24 of 81 seats they did not win. The 24 non-Reform areas are diverse. My seat is an historic market town. Others are in a commuter town, rural villages and a real variety of places. Reform took areas demographically similar to the 24 places they avoided their clutches.

The overwhelming feature of most of the 24 seats Reform did not win is that at least one party practices community style politics in these. Where at least one party delivers regular leaflets, knocks on doors and stays in touch outside of election time that party won and Reform was defeated.

Reform won in many parts of Kent, mostly held by Conservatives before, that has no or limited traditions of this type of campaigning. Many Conservatives were elected in 2021 and before with minimal campaigning and without strong challenge from anyone else. They were swept away by Reform’s friendly faced Nigel mailshots.

Reform over-estimate their support. They forget they only have 37% of the popular vote in Kent and are doing things (letting down Ukraine, appeasing violence against women and girls, telling disabled people to get lost, threatening school transport) that will alienate many people. Two-horse races between Lib Dems and Reform will see Labour and Green and perhaps half of Conservatives choose us.

In places like Kent we need to build a bigger Lib Dem team to practice effective community politics across more of the county. But where we do that we can and will beat Reform in future elections.

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Antony Hook is Liberal Democrat leader of the opposition on Kent County Council

# TAKING GOOD CARE

## Sophie Layton looks at Ed Davey's book on his life beyond politics as a carer

Marking exactly one year since the announcement of last year's general election, Sir Ed Davey released his first book. A touching tribute to carers everywhere, the book is a chance for us all to see beyond the politician and stunt-enthusiast, and take a deeper look at Davey's personal life.

Following Davey's experiences caring for both his mother and now his son John, *Why I Care & Why Care Matters* is a deeply personal insight into the Davey's private life, the challenges his family have faced when adapting to John's condition, and the experiences that have led to Davey's strong focus on carers and caring during the election and since, and orienting much of the Liberal Democrats' focus since 2024. The book also contains anecdotal stories from other carers from a variety of backgrounds, sharing their own tales to highlight the breadth of caring responsibility and circumstances.

Having read this book just over 24 hours after publication to say I found it captivating would be a major understatement.

There was not a single person who was unmoved by Davey's touching video one year ago, and this book goes a long way to filling in the wider picture, connecting you with the man behind it. Reading about how his childhood experiences caring for his mother has influenced his current approach with John feels like you are not only connecting with the family but gives a closeness as if you were there.

One of the most touching passages comes from Davey's recollections of touring domestically and internationally in search of effective treatments for John, a journey with which many will be able to empathise. Tales of hope and despair, progress and determination show Davey as a caring and loving family man, a characteristic that not many politicians would have assigned to them. It is also incredibly powerful that the book demonstrates coming to terms with the realities of long-term conditions, rather than dressing up the raw emotions with resoluteness.

The book also does a fantastic job at highlighting challenges that carers face. Whether long waits for appointments, referrals and treatments, to wrestling with the Department of Work & Pensions, or the financial difficulties that being a carer can impose, Davey is direct and open with the hardships his family have faced; for many, it will be a reflection of their own lives, one that Davey has shone an impressively powerful spotlight on.

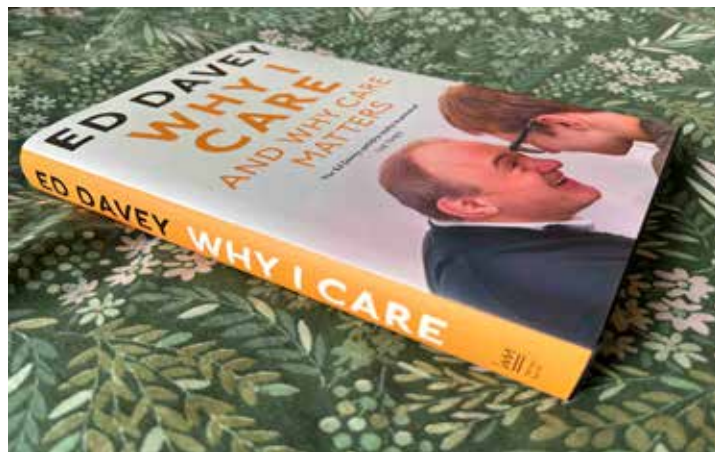
Davey has a captivating writing style that hooks readers that feels not only natural, but as if from a seasoned writer. While he will have much experience from his time in Parliament and in Government, a heartfelt account is an entirely different format, and achieving such a successful product is commendable. While I am a fast reader, this book was completed even quicker than I had imagined.

I also want to particularly highlight the stories from individual carers that complement Davey's own experience. Handing approximately one-third of the book over to others, we get the chance to hear and highlight a range of experiences, challenges and points of view. Davey, despite still facing significant obstacles, it cannot be denied occupies a relatively privileged position, and seeing this utilised to highlight carers overall is a stroke of genius and a chance to highlight the everyday and unsung carers.

My one major criticism comes from the imposition of policy or agenda points throughout. While I applaud the use of the publication to put forward an agenda and several ideas to make carers' lives materially better, this is occasionally done in a heavy-handed manner. Several times there is a direct reference to Liberal Democrat policies or actions, or pressure that the party is applying, which can represent a sharp change in tone, and sometimes feels too much

as if a secondary motive is being applied. The book overall does a good job at splitting from this party-political tone, but occasionally slips back, which can snap you as a reader out of the narrative.

Regardless of this minor criticism, this feels like a new frontier being tackled, shining a light on the army of carers across the nation giving up everything for the selflessness of looking after another. I hope that many choose to read Davey's book, for an emotional and powerful account it may be, it also continues a conversation so rarely had, and yet exceptionally important.



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

*Why I Care & Why Care Matters* by Sir Ed Davey Harper Collins 2025 £20



# IS IT TOO LATE FOR AMERICA?

## Trump's cruel and dubiously legal acts are even splitting the MAGA base; could the Democrats retake Congress in time to stop him asks Martha Elliott

On 30 June US Senator Angus King, an Independent from Maine where I live, stood on the Senate floor and proclaimed, "Mr. President. This bill is a farce. Imagine a bunch of guys sitting around a table, saying, I've got a great idea. Let's give \$32,000 worth of a tax breaks to a millionaire and we'll pay for it by taking health insurance away from lower-income and middle-income people. And to top it off we cut food stamps, SNAP, and food aid to people?"

"It's a joke. I would say it's a joke, but it's not the least bit funny. I've been in this business of public policy now for 20 years, eight as governor, 12 years in the United States Senate. I have never seen a bill this bad. I have never seen a bill that is this irresponsible, regressive, and downright cruel."

King had done his homework and pointed out the disastrous effect that the bill would have on Maine which is demographically the oldest state in the Union.

He estimates that as many as 60,000 Mainers would lose health coverage and four rural hospitals will have to close.

The Congressional Budget Office, a nonpartisan arm of the Congress, estimates that by 2034, about \$1tn would be cut from the Medicaid Budget, increasing the number of uninsured people by 10-11 million people and Obamacare (ACA) would lose \$526bn

So poor people lose health coverage while rich people get tax cuts. For those who make \$5-10m a year, the tax cuts would be in the hundreds of thousands. What's even more surprising about this bill is that the vast majority of Americans were and are against it.

### GOLF HABITS

It's interesting to note that as of early July Trump's golf habits have cost the American people \$53m because of the security required. In addition, he spent \$45m to have a military parade on 14 June, his 79th

birthday.

Trump had demanded that the bill on his desk by 4 July, thus virtually making it impossible to debate the 1000+ page document.

Because Trump picked the 249th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, many Americans thought he was strongly implying that the 'One Big Beautiful Bill', as Republicans have named it, was somehow historically significant. Not so. By ramming an omnibus bill through Congress, Trump and his henchmen were able to cover up some of the disastrous parts to it. In addition, he needed to refund the

Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which not only is about to run out of money, and is already a billion dollars over budget.

The areas of the government where spending is drastically increased are Homeland Security and the military. When I first saw the pictures of Immigration and Customs Enforcement

(ICE) clad in masks and dragging people into unmarked vans, I flashed on the ISIS executioners who beheaded journalists. Law enforcement people should not be faceless, badge-less thugs who hide behind balaclavas.

Alleged Venezuelan gang members were deported to a notorious prison in El Salvador without any due process of law. One of the most infamous arrests was that of a Maryland man, Kilmar Abrego Garcia who was mistakenly deported, and he was held there for several months even after the US Supreme Court ordered that the government must facilitate his return. On 21 May he was returned to the US but then arrested and charged with "conspiracy to unlawfully transport illegal aliens for financial gain" and "unlawful transportation of illegal aliens for financial gain."





Attorney General Pam Bondi said Garcia will be tried in the US and if found guilty, will serve some time in a US prison before being returned to El Salvador. Other aliens have been deported to third countries such as South Sudan where they not only aren't citizens but don't even know the language.

Andrea Velez, a US citizen, was arrested by ICE agents and detained after falsely being accused of 'forcefully obstructing' officers during an immigration raid in Los Angeles.

According to her mother and sister, she was arrested after they dropped her off at her work as a marketing designer. She was thrown to the ground, handcuffed, and put in an unmarked van.

Velez is a graduate of California Polytechnic and has never been in trouble with the law. "Andrea is a victim of excessive use of force by federal agents, they had no right to stop her and no right to beat her," said her attorney Luis Carillo.

It is estimated that more than 70% of the people arrested had no criminal record. Their only 'crime' was the colour of their skin.

Many ICE agents have gone into federal courthouses to scheduled hearings for amnesty petitions and grabbed the immigrants as they left the courtrooms. When citizens tried to block ICE agents from entering a federal courthouse in Los Angeles, Trump sent in the National Guard and then marines to stop the protests. In a recent protest, it was alleged that officers had been attacked and Trump's response was that they would be arrested and incarcerated for attacking officers. This comes from the same president who pardoned all the 6 January Capitol rioters, including the ones who attacked officers.

Perhaps most frightening is that the ICE budget has been increased threefold to \$30bn which is for hiring more agents. In addition, there is \$45bn for immigration detention centres such as Alligator Alcatraz, a trailer park in the middle of the Florida Everglades infested with alligators and poisonous snakes. The FBI budget is only \$10.1bn. Now ICE will be the federal government's largest enforcement agency more than the FBI and Drug Enforcement Administration combined.

DHS is run by Kristi Noam, former governor of South Dakota and infamously known for writing in her memoir that she shot her dog because he couldn't be trained.

Noem is a sycophant and seems to unquestionably carry out Trump's agenda to deport millions of illegal aliens. What is most disturbing about the budget and methods of DHS is that Trump now has his own army of ICE agents who are willing to carry out orders just because they came from Noem or Trump. Trump has made it clear that he may deport US citizens.

In Liberator 428, I mentioned that only the federal courts seem to be willing to stop Trump. The Republicans in Congress have been unwilling to challenge him because he threatens to run an opponent in a primary to oppose them if they don't fall in line.

*"What is difficult to comprehend is why the Republicans don't stand up to Trump"*

## SPINELESS WILLINGNESS

But now the Supreme Court has taken away the power of the district courts and circuit courts of appeal. The Supreme Court has shown its spineless willingness to defy the constitution and

the law. In unsigned orders, the conservative majority has given an extraordinary ruling that district court restraining orders do not apply nationwide.

It's not clear how many district courts or circuit courts would have to give a restraining order to make the orders stand or force the high court to rule. In the last weeks, the high court has said Trump could continue to deport aliens, and an internal DHS memo has said that could happen with as little as seven days' notice. The court also issued an unsigned order that said the Department of Education could continue firing people - even though those people were hired under authorisation from Congress, which is the only branch of government allowed to make laws and allocate funds.

What is difficult to comprehend is why the Republicans don't stand up to Trump. Apparently they think that they need his base to be reelected. But what they don't understand is that if they did stand up to him and took a more centrist approach, they would gain the support of Independents and maybe even some Democrats. Plus, the majority of Americans are against the tariffs - and Trump is known as TACO (Trump Always Chickens Out), so the markets aren't reacting to his latest rants because they don't believe them.

In addition, the inflation rate is up by 2.9% as of last month. No-one is happy about that. Even the MAGA base has risen up to criticise Trump. In the last weeks, the Justice Department said that they would not be releasing any more files related to the sex trafficker Jeffery Epstein. Just days before Attorney General Pam Bondi said the client list was on her desk and she was reviewing it. Now she says there is no client list. The MAGA conservatives are outraged.

Is the house of cards finally crumbling? If all these missteps don't bring him down, the 2026 midterm elections certainly will change the balance of power in Congress. It is possible that both houses will be controlled by the Democrats - and then Trump will probably be impeached for a third time. Maybe this time, he and his henchmen will be thrown out of power.

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Martha Elliott has been a journalist for 45 years. She has produced hundreds of television shows on politics and constitutional questions and written several books. Her last was *The Man in the Monster*. She lives in Maine

# LABOUR'S WAR ON LOCAL DEMOCRACY

Under the guise of devolution, Labour is centralising power into huge councils and banning the committee system despite its strengths, says Sabah Hamed

As the government trumpets its so-called devolution agenda, an uncomfortable truth is emerging: what is branded as the decentralisation of power is, in practice, becoming quite the opposite.

Rather than empowering communities and strengthening the fabric of local democracy, we are witnessing the systematic erosion of meaningful power from local authorities. Decision-making and financial control are increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few - specifically, those of regional mayors and large, more distant unitary councils.

This centralisation trend has been quietly but steadily growing under successive governments of all political stripes. Under the guise of efficiency, we have seen the effective abolition of dozens of district and county councils across England and Wales.

These smaller, more locally attuned institutions are being replaced by monolithic unitary authorities. A county the size of Surrey, with a population exceeding 1.3m, is now expected to function with just two local councils managing everything from adult social care to potholes. How such vast entities are expected to effectively respond to the distinctive needs of their diverse communities remains unclear. And it is unclear because, in most cases, that connection has simply been severed.

## PROFOUND QUESTIONS

This raises profound questions about the future of local democracy. If this model is extended further - and there is every indication that it will be - what lies ahead for London boroughs? Will they, too, be merged, doubled, or trebled in size to fit the latest model of administrative convenience? And if so, what will happen to local accountability, community voice, and resident participation? These are not abstract concerns—they strike at the heart of what it means to have a government that is truly representative, truly local, and genuinely accountable.

From where I sit in Kingston upon Thames, one of London's outer boroughs, we see things differently.

While the national trend pushes towards a more presidential, centralised model of governance, we have taken a different route - by reintroducing and strengthening the committee system. Our governance is built upon a model that places collaboration, transparency, and community at its heart. And in doing so, we have provided a counter-argument to those who insist there is no alternative to the opaque leader and cabinet model favoured by both Labour and the Conservatives.

We've gone further still by embedding neighbourhood

committees and expanding community engagement initiatives. These frameworks help ensure that power is not just devolved from Whitehall to the town hall - but from the town hall into the heart of our neighbourhoods.

In doing so, we are offering a practical, functioning model of participatory local democracy that deserves wider attention and replication.

The committee system is not glamorous. It doesn't lend itself to flashy headlines or sweeping executive decisions. But what it lacks in speed, it more than makes up for in democratic depth, deliberation, and legitimacy.

Unlike the leader and cabinet model - which centralises authority in a small group of executive councillors, often aligned to party politics - the committee system distributes power more equitably.

Every decision is made in public, by cross-party groups of councillors with relevant knowledge and local understanding. This structure actively invites participation, fosters thoughtful debate, and subjects decisions to a meaningful level of scrutiny.

In Kingston, we've paired our committee system with a strong neighbourhood governance model. This means we hold regular neighbourhood committees in different parts of the borough, where residents can speak directly with councillors, ask questions, and shape local priorities. These are not just consultation events. They are forums where power and responsibility are genuinely devolved - where decisions are made in real time, informed by those who live and work in the areas.

This approach is, unsurprisingly, popular. Residents see a structure they can understand. They can attend a meeting in the community where they live and influence policy and outcomes that directly affect their day-to-day lives. And when things go wrong - or indeed right - they know who to talk to. That's a far cry from the increasingly corporate, centralised model of local governance, where decisions are taken behind closed doors, often without any clear line of accountability back to the public - let alone meaningful participation from those most affected.

Furthermore, these meetings help councillors stay grounded. By facing the residents they serve regularly, they hear firsthand the frustrations, needs, and aspirations of their communities. That regular contact sharpens governance and ensures that policies, however well-intentioned, do not drift into abstraction or technocracy.

The main argument made by proponents of the leader and cabinet model is efficiency. They argue that decisions can be taken quickly, aligned to political

manifestos, and executed without the delays of discussion or debate. There's some truth to that; committees can take longer. But the delays are marginal, and more importantly: at what cost does this perceived speed come?

Speedy decision-making can also mean insular thinking, the sidelining of alternative and opposition voices, and – most dangerously – a widening democratic gap between councillors and communities. In the cabinet model, most councillors become spectators, with little meaningful input beyond formal scrutiny committees that have limited influence. This turns full council meetings into symbolic performances rather than substantive decision-making forums. The actual work is done elsewhere, often in private, among a select few.

In contrast, Kingston's committee system fosters shared ownership of the issues for debate and the decisions that stem from them. Every councillor, regardless of party affiliation, plays a role in shaping policy. That leads not only to better debate, but better policy too. When councillors work together across party lines and within subject-specific committees, they build understanding, expertise, and long-term commitment to the issues they oversee. This is a system where knowledge accumulates, rather than dissipates with every cabinet reshuffle or political swing.

Take, for instance, our recent work on the borough's Climate Action Plan or the reintroduction of the winter fuel allowance for vulnerable residents. Under the committee model, councillors from different parties came together, alongside partners from community and specialist organisations, to debate, challenge, and refine the strategy in public. The result? A robust, credible, and community-backed plan that has more legitimacy because it was co-created and openly tested—not simply signed off by a single cabinet member after a short consultation process.

Another, often overlooked, benefit of the committee system is the development of councillors. Rather than operating solely as backbenchers with little influence, committee members are active participants in shaping policy and delivery. Over time, this fosters a deeper understanding of the complex issues local authorities face, from housing and adult social care to active travel, education, digital inclusion, and environmental strategy.

This sense of ownership and involvement translates into more thoughtful policies. Councillors are not just rubber-stamping officer recommendations. They are working with officers to test assumptions, challenge priorities, and ensure policies are fit for purpose and locally sensitive. In the long run, that makes for better governance, more effective public services, and stronger civic leadership.

A deeper knowledge of council processes also makes councillors more responsive to constituents. They're able to explain how and why decisions were made, provide constructive feedback, and advocate more effectively on behalf of residents. This empowerment

*"The committee system is not glamorous. But what it lacks in speed, it more than makes up for in democratic depth, deliberation, and legitimacy"*

turns councillors into genuine representatives of their communities, not just figureheads.

## **CYNICISM AND ALIENATION**

In an age of growing political cynicism and alienation from government, transparency is not a luxury, it is essential. The committee system provides this in abundance. Meetings are open to the public. Reports and

recommendations are published in advance. Residents can attend, speak, and see the decision-making process unfold in real time. And crucially, decisions are made collectively and openly—not in private pre-meetings or partisan briefings.

This openness has helped to rebuild trust in local government in Kingston. Residents feel they are part of the process, not just subjects of it. And when they disagree with a decision, they at least know how and why it was made. That is the bedrock of democratic legitimacy.

Contrast this with the creeping centralisation we see elsewhere. The devolution model currently being rolled out – particularly in combined authority areas – places extraordinary power in the hands of a single mayor. While this may work in cities like Manchester, with clearly defined urban challenges and shared regional identity, it is ill-suited to complex, diverse counties, rural areas, or sprawling metropolitan regions with distinct identities and needs.

In many areas, the new mayors control billions in funding and wide-ranging powers, with limited local scrutiny or accountability mechanisms. The risk is not just inefficiency or poor policy, it is democratic decay. The more decisions are taken at arm's length (and much further) from communities, the less those communities feel they have a voice, and the more they are left behind and become disaffected. This is a surefire way to fuel mistrust and disengagement from the political process.

And this isn't just about regional mayors. The ongoing drive towards large, unitary authorities, often justified on the grounds of financial savings, removes the layer of local government that residents feel closest to. These local councils have decades of experience, institutional knowledge, and community connection. When a local planning or housing issue must now be decided by a council 40 miles away, how can residents feel heard, let alone involved?

London, so far, has been spared the worst of this consolidation. But for how long? It's not hard to imagine a future government proposing the merging of boroughs, or giving the Mayor of London more powers at the expense of local councils.

This would be a profound mistake. London's strength lies in its borough-level governance and its ability to reflect the unique character and needs of its diverse communities. Kingston is not Tower Hamlets. Croydon is not Camden. Attempts to flatten that diversity in the name of administrative efficiency will only create new layers of bureaucracy and further dilute the voice of local communities. (Contd on Page 28...)



# FATAL WAITING

## Mathew Hulbert calls for a plan to sort out social care so the NHS is not leaving those like his late mother to suffer

We must properly fund the NHS...or more families will be failed like mine has been.

I'm writing this just a few days after the third anniversary of my mum's death in July 2022, two days after waiting an agonising 11 hours for an ambulance after a fall at home.

I'll never forget those deeply distressing 11 hours, with my beloved mum begging me to tell her when help was finally going to arrive (she said she'd hurt her ribs in the fall, so we weren't able to safely move her ourselves).

All I was able to say was "I'm sure it'll be here soon, mum."

I know you're not really meant to do this but all I could do on that day - every few hours - was to phone 999 yet again and stress that my mum was still on her bedroom floor, in pain, distressed, upset, and implore them to send help.

Of course I understand that my mum was breathing, so might not have been seen as an absolute emergency but she was 78-years old, quite frail, in pain and distress and it's clearly unacceptable that she had to wait 11 hours.

We'd called for an ambulance at 5.01am and help finally arrived at 4pm.

Mum was taken to hospital where she died two days later after an infection turned to sepsis.

I'll never know if my mum might still be with us today if help had arrived sooner, but one thing is for certain - spending 11 hours on her bedroom floor in pain and distressed certainly didn't help matters.

Since my dear mum's death and in her memory I've campaigned for better emergency care and for a properly funded and genuinely public NHS.

That campaign has taken me to Downing Street on two occasions and has seen me give upwards of 100 interviews to local, regional, and national media outlets.

Doing so has been painful, of course it has. It's meant reliving what happened and the loss of the person I loved most in the world.

But I need to do all I can, to try to ensure that no other family goes through what we did.

Now of course I know that, tragically, people are still suffering and dying every day as a result of delays in ambulances/emergency care.

Indeed recent figures from the trade union Unison found paramedics across the UK are being forced to watch patients deteriorate, and in some cases die, because they can't hand them over to A&E departments.

Unison said: "Unison figures gathered from nearly 600 ambulance staff paint a grim picture of how long periods stuck in the back of ambulances-often in excess of 12 hours-are affecting patients with conditions ranging from chest pain to severe breathing issues."

It added: "Overall more than three quarters (77%) of paramedics and emergency medical technicians say they've had to look after people in the back of ambulances when stuck outside A&E departments in the past year."

"This was an issue in my mum's case, too, as we later learned that on the day she waited 11 hours, ambulances were backed up outside a local hospital, unable to offload patients because there were patients in hospital who were well enough to go home but who couldn't because they didn't have a sufficient care package at home or in the community.

Which brings me to another very important point, that the NHS crisis won't be fixed until the social care crisis is fixed and this Labour government, like its Tory and, yes, Coalition predecessors, has kicked social care reform into the long grass, with no mention of any note in the recent NHS 10 year plan.

Any investment in the NHS is, of course, to be welcomed but it just doesn't go far enough.

This is, after all, a health service for tens of millions of people in a modern Western democracy with an increasingly ageing population.

Health can't be done on the cheap and we shouldn't pretend that it can.

The fact is we're still some way off the European average on spending on health services.

The last Labour government, to be fair to them, did indeed bring health spending up to the European average of the time and, as a result of that and the hard work of doctors, nurses, and all other NHS staff, public satisfaction in the health service was the highest ever recorded.

We call on this government to do the same.

It's also very concerning that billions of what is being invested may well end up being siphoned away from the NHS and into the pockets of private healthcare companies, who drain staff capacity away from our public health service.

Meanwhile while apparently being fine with increased use of the private sector, this government seems to be trying to divide NHS patients and staff (in this case resident doctors seeking pay parity).

I want to see a nation where we're united in wanting a properly funded NHS where patients and staff are treated with dignity and respect.

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Mathew Hulbert is a former Liberal Democrat councillor and co-host of the Political Frenemies podcast

# NO CARE TO TAKE

## Tempted by the talk of 130,000 social care vacancies Ruth Bright applied but ended up back where she started

### SCENE ONE

I am booked for an interview at a residential home for people with dementia. On first impressions there seems a cosy atmosphere. Less auspiciously I arrive at the same time as the undertaker – there to fetch a sadly deceased resident, but he glides into the building with great discretion and everyone's dignity remains intact.

I explain my experience of working with people with dementia. As the war medal and sepia pictures and dried flowers come out of the memory box, I have as an example, the interviewers are enthusiastic and coo and nod in all the right places. I am the only applicant - there are never many takers at under £11 an hour. All's well. But, behold, a stumbling block. There is warmth around me. I am certain we could all work together, but...this home is part of a larger corporate entity providing 'homes from home' for 'seniors'. There is a clodhopping lumpen national human resources department. It has none of the nimble thinking of the fast food and hospitality sectors where my children have had part time jobs – where they are offered convenient part-time hours around their studies. No flexibility here. The only option is 40 hours a week, including alternate weekends, take it or leave it. It is a punishing deal I have no need and no wish to adopt (in my late 50s). I can't help being cynical about the commercial interests of 'head office'.

### SCENE TWO

I am working as a dementia activity coordinator, but feeling distinctly out of place. There is a microscopic staff room and only a toilet cubicle to change in. No actual malevolence but this a sad place with lots of 'neutral' care, lifted by caring Filipino staff; cleaning staff are Nepali and very vulnerable as they speak little English. Craftily, the management have decided that the twice daily tea round is an 'activity' for residents unable to leave their rooms. There are pleasant quizzes and chat but only for the tiny proportion who can get themselves to the 'day lounge'. They claim to pay the new minimum wage, but don't. The trainer who ran my induction sessions is a relic from the 1970s with a dodgy line in rape 'jokes'. I last less than five days.

### SCENE THREE

Back to the drawing board. I am getting nowhere with the main care vacancy sites for dementia activity co-ordinator jobs.

I ring about a post, the owner admits I am well qualified but suddenly withdraws the role, suspiciously asking why I don't get more hours where I am currently working.

Calling another home, the manager twice says she will ring back but never does. Two years later the post is still being advertised. This was reported to the Care Quality Commission – the yawn of uninterest was audible. I ring a big well-known chain of homes, surprised by lack of interest in my cv. They say 'off the record' they only appoint if applicants live within five miles of the home – even if the only applicant lives slightly further away.

In the end I found, as the Brontës would call it "a pleasing situation". A place with an open culture, but such a meagre budget for activities (and my salary), I couldn't sustain the role. I now only ever work in social care as a volunteer (which is right back where I started 30 years ago.)

So what do I learn from all this?

I am certain that one of the reasons homes cannot appoint activity co-ordinators and other quality of life roles is that they don't want to. The Care Quality Commission asks for 'person-centred' care but does not require a home to have an activity co-ordinator or programme. I am certain some of the responses I received were because the home wanted to save on salaries and told relatives and inspectors they couldn't find applicants. An actual applicant put a fly in the ointment.

My concerns about care sector recruitment go further. The recent exposé about care homes sacking foreign staff who report abuse of elderly people rings true to me. I am certain that some homes prefer foreign staff because they are dependent on their employers for UK residency and are therefore usually deemed more compliant on pay and care standards.

There is much talk of the economically inactive and much worry about how young people gain work experience. Social care roles could provide an answer but only if the employers are more imaginative about part time and flexible roles. Even when not protecting profits by constraining their salary bills, they are certainly stuck in old patterns of working which will simply will not fill their vacancies.

I have been a mum, a councillor, a parliamentary candidate, advice worker, and caseworker; but there are few joys to compare with the honour of sharing moments in the last months of someone's life.

Working with older people is a job to be proud of. Grab one of those 131,000 vacancies while you can. The ones that really are vacancies of course.

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Ruth Bright is former deputy leader of the Liberal Democrat group in Southwark and a former parliamentary candidate. She has also worked in dementia related roles for much of the last 30 years

# IS POLITICS ONLY FOR PAVEMENTS

## John Shreeve seeks a little help from Miss Marple to find out how the Lib Dems could appeal to angry voters turning to Reform

As a child, most Sundays saw lunch followed by evening tea with my mother's famous scones and family time in front of the television.

James Heriot was hugely popular, but it was Miss Marple who, when explaining how she had solved the case, would say something like "well it was obvious, it was just the same as poor Dolly and the Vicar" with the answer for Jane found by observing life in St Mary Mead, her home village.

The point here for me is that I now realise that the same seems to be true for me, I always come back to the experience of growing up in a small seaside town and how that experience has shaped my political views.

As the child of a shopkeeper growing up in a Norfolk seaside town built on fishing and tourism, from quite a young age, I was aware that the town was divided between two tribes. On the estate where we lived, we were surrounded by people who owned their own homes, many had run small businesses, and I imagine they were the type of people who would have stood for the national anthem. They firmly believed in queen, country and empire.

Whereas at school many of my classmates came from the very large council estate across the main road. Their fathers were fishermen and mothers worked at the huge Birds Eye factory, walking through the town in their yellow wellies, but it was their fathers and mothers who were going on strike so the buses didn't run or the ferries in the harbour couldn't sail, not the parents of the children where we lived.

### PATERNALISTIC GRIP

As I got older and started to help in the family business, I also realised that another group existed. Out in the countryside a different kind of divide could be found, again the gulf was between those with property and assets and those without, but here the extent of the paternalistic grip of the employers seemed extreme, even to me as a teenager.

Life in the countryside was hugely limiting, for example a trip to Norwich some 20 miles away was extremely rare, perhaps only entertained annually and to Yarmouth only on market day. Farm workers were never well paid but their dependency on a small number of employers let alone the grip of peer group and community ensured continual Tory subservience. Indeed, I know of many such folks who still today see voting Tory as their patriotic duty.

For the other side of the divide as I cycled to visit school friends who lived on the huge council estate the sense of change was immediate, the smell of coal smoke because each house had a back boiler and no drives had cars parked on them, but it was in many

respects the same as the unspoken control in the countryside. Eyes following you and as I got older the idea that at any moment, I would be asked to show my party card either Labour or Communist. From a formative political aspect though, some years later, some of the most interesting people I met lived on that estate with one of the bus drivers having the largest personal library I have ever seen and regularly visiting Russia.

Our shop's customers came from both sides of the divide and so being careful to not show allegiance was essential. Knowing the boundaries was vital because straying over it might be compared to marrying outside of a religion, resulting in excommunication.

So it was truly shocking during last year's general election to find myself representing us in a hustings at the church I attended as a child. Slap bang in the middle of one of those housing estates and where its residents clapped enthusiastically as Rupert Lowe - then in Reform - answered every question either by blaming immigration or in the case of underfunding of the NHS blaming diversity champions as a typically woke waste of money. This was the high point for me of the campaign. Perhaps even more interesting were the conversations afterwards where many said that they weren't interested in his answers but having been betrayed by politicians of all hues, here was someone new around whom to rally.

The point here is that the extent of the unspoken control and expectation by political parties of allegiance by sections of our society for any usual view - including what many of us might currently see as Liberalism - has run its course.

The reality, politically as expressed by the electorate, is of a world seemingly beyond the control of their politicians or who are unwilling to confront issues that may cost them votes.

In the absence of a conversation or stance that tackles that core disbelief the populist solutions paraded by Reform - even though for many are not regarded as credible - will continue to draw support as way of demonstrating their despair. But what we might also recognise, as the previous tribes disintegrate, is the scale of the 'community' that's seeking an alternative.

Everything in the town that I grew up in was about to change. With natural gas being discovered in the southern North Sea suddenly the town was full of Americans in Stetsons who called my father Len and not Mr Shreeve, and cheap package holidays changed the way the British used the seaside. What this also heralded was a massive boost with incredibly well-paid jobs.



I mention all of this because the stark divide between the two tribes was about to get vastly worse as Margaret Thatcher weaponised the winter of discontent to force the nation to decide between rubbish piled up in the streets and her Hayek economic free market dogma that enterprise had to be free to do as it pleases.

What her election also seemed to herald was an age of aggressive division. The abandonment of even the slightest pretence that a key function of responsible democratic government is to lead and act as peacemaker.

Grey areas were not permitted. Using the complaint that the country had a choice between union dogma or rule of law enabled her to claim that she had no choice other than to take radical action. Using advertising and easy to understand home truths such as 'the sums need to add up' forced the electorate to choose between the unreasonable demands made by excessively powerful unions - as described at the time - and an economy incapable of funding the services we had all come to rely on.

Of course, that British management was so obviously inadequate when compared with others, or that - just as now - levels of inward investment were so low that others were able to produce vastly better products was silently ignored.

So, what of the Liberal Democrats? Perhaps it was forgivable, after last year's general election success, that in our more excitable moments the idea would surface, given a fair wind and enough paper stuffed through enough letter boxes that we might be able to replace the Tories as the official opposition at the next general election.

Time moves on and if we keep a lid on our excitement for a moment, why is it that - given this Labour Government's outstanding first year with such stunning successes as the farm taxes and heating for pensioners - Nigel Farage and Reform, with his 'balanced party and constructive approach to policy' are seemingly taking British politics to the cleaners?

## PERSONALITY CULT

How do we then combat a personality cult that seeks to destroy our democratic institutions when one of their key weapons is to complain that the 'legacy parties' 'us' have played a key role in defending those institutions.

With the public mood so set against the preservation of the status quo how do we make a winning case for the preservation of the rule of law and our values and at the same time provide an alternative future for our communities in a way that benefits all and clearly shows the truth of the offer being made by populism?

The best place to start is to have the conversation and to ensure it's built around our core underpinning beliefs. Using our liberal bedrock of personal freedom and community engagement we can engineer an entirely new social contract between the electorate and its democratic governance.

Such an exciting new approach would transform our relationship with the electorate and the key to achieving this is the relationship the party has with its

*"From pavement  
bashing paper shovers  
to a fully developed  
political party"*

members, especially through the activities and services provided by their local party.

Our local parties must become fully political and able to access a fully developed range of political debates enabling them to add this to their work within their local communities.

From pavement bashing paper shovers to a fully developed political party.

There is no doubt that the systems and techniques we use are crucial, good data, well designed literature, dedicated local representation and hard work, nothing can replace those essential elements.

What we don't seem able to do is also ensure that we talk about the issues and take them back to the core of our offering starting with the preamble to the constitution.

"The Liberal Democrats exist to build and safeguard a fair, free and open society, in which we seek to balance the fundamental values of liberty, equality and community, and in which no-one shall be enslaved by poverty, ignorance or conformity."

Currently this party exists on a base of extremely hard-working local activists centred on winning control of local authorities. What every local party is desperately short of are activists.

A few weeks ago, at a very small meeting in Lowestoft, the group was asked what they would like to achieve as we fight to bring the Lib Dems back to life in the town. One person answered 'get an MP elected' so I asked how? The answer came back: "Oh I don't know".

So I asked why, and this is where it gets very revealing. Because in her opinion our role in parliament was to be the vital balance between the extremes of Labour and Conservative.

I then explained that the usual route is to start by winning control of your local authority so you can demonstrate credibility and then you might be able to win. But when she asked "who is my local authority" that my mouth fell open.

She explained that she had no worries locally and what went on locally was fine. To be credible and worth supporting what she wanted to know about was our views on the issues on the six o'clock news; Trump, Gaza, interest rates, a failing economy.

What our underlying reason for existence was she had no idea, and no one had ever told her. All she ever heard about were requests for donations and delivery rounds. What she wanted to get from being a member simply isn't being provided. If we do so who knows what we might achieve.

We can and must have vastly greater ambitions than that.

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John Shreeve is chair of the Social Liberal Forum

## CAMPANALE CASE

*Dear Liberator,*

Readers of Liberator may be interested in a few details that the author of Radical Bulletin may have missed from the story of LDCF writing to EHRC about David Campanale in Liberator 429. This is of course an ongoing story, so more to come.

For those unfamiliar with the story, David has been a member of Lib Dems for 21 years overall and is a long-term member and founding executive member of the Liberal Democrat Christian Forum (LDCF), a large Party affiliated organisation with over 400 members.

David used to work in the whips' office for the party in Parliament and was a Lib Dem councillor for eight years and then vice-chair of Kingston Lib Dems, one of the biggest branches in the country. He speaks publicly for minorities such as the Uyghurs and was last year name-checked by the Foreign Secretary in Parliament.

David held a senior role in the Christian Peoples Alliance (CPA) but was never its leader and left when he realised the party was heading in a direction he could not support. David passed through the PPC process six months after his return to the party, with full knowledge of his past affiliation. He was marked as having 'exceptional qualities'. He stood as Lib Dems Parliamentary candidate in Spelthorne in 2019 and nearly tripled the Lib Dem vote against (at that time popular) Kwasi Kwarteng.

In late 2021, he applied for the PPC role for Sutton & Cheam. About 100 people turned up for the selection hustings. The only question about conscience matters at the event was about assisted dying. David explained that he would vote against. He was then voted in as PPC, ahead of Luke Taylor, the current MP, who was in third place.

In early 2022, within a few days of being announced as candidate, and following a tweet by a Labour Party activist, he was challenged about his role by a group of local party members.

He subsequently faced two deselection votes, the first having been judged invalid. He was deselected at the second vote and continues his appeal to this day.

A number of complaints were made to the Standards Office that he had hidden his past or that he didn't share Lib Dem values, but they were all rejected, together with attempts to have him removed from the approved candidates list and even expelled from the party.

Immediately after the challenges against him started, David felt attacked for his faith views and complained. Not one of his or others' complaints about discrimination since then has been investigated.

According to the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), parties must take 'very seriously' complaints of discrimination.

David has complained about discrimination with very clear evidence many, many times over the last three years to different party bodies. LDCF also wrote to party president Mark Pack and other state and regional party executives. There is still no sign of an investigation. Writing to EHRC was our attempt to

encourage an investigation, instead of going to court. The court case does not stop an investigation starting and that investigation might even stop the court case in its tracks.

"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."

He certainly had no time to underperform, as the deselection campaign started only a few weeks after his member selection, so what was the reason?

This is a sorry tale. After three years, it is time for the party to engage with David and resolve this.

Toby Price

Chair, Liberal Democrat Christian Forum

## WHERE'S SLF?

*Dear Liberator,*

As a naturally leaning Social Liberal Forum (SLF) supporter where is the SLF? Occasionally, I get emails about meetings or activities at conference but trying to engage with them and like minded supporters outside these fora is challenging at best.

Their website mainly consists of holding pages many, years out of date. Ditto for their blogposts, podcasts, news etc. The last posting on their Facebook page is from 2021. What is going on?

Andy Bennett  
Croydon

## ON THE TOWNS

*Dear Liberator,*

Your comment that, "The effective Lib Dem presence in urban areas is largely limited to London and Hull" (Liberator, 429) must be news to Liberal Democrats in places such as Edinburgh, Sheffield, Liverpool or Portsmouth, to name but four.

Mark Pack  
President, Liberal Democrats

## DEFENDING EQUALITY

*Dear Liberator,*

Members will be aware of the recent Supreme Court decision that sex is defined by biological sex under equality law, and that this ruling has created concern in the trans community and the wider LGBTQ+ community generally.

A prime objective of Vale fo White Horse Council has always been to provide support to all of the communities in our area, but perhaps especially to those most vulnerable to being abused, amongst which I should include persons who are transgender.

Members will recall motions in 2021 and 2024 which were part of the wider work this council undertakes to deliver services and to offer support and space to all communities in a fair way. Those motions restated our belief that all LGBTQ+ persons are valued members of our community.

I have taken advice from the monitoring officer about the decision of the Supreme Court and the impact it will have upon the way the council acts towards and with the trans community. I agree with him that the key issue will be not words and definitions but, far more importantly, how the ruling and the council's actions are translated into practice.

The Supreme Court decision itself made clear that trans people have not lost legal protection and that

everyone, including the trans community and the wider LGBTQ+ community, remains protected under the Equality Act. This council's stance will remain positive, endorsing and caring towards the trans community as has been made clear through our motions on this issue.

Following my recent conversations with them, I know that I speak for all the group leaders and I believe that I speak all members, as well as the vast majority of the citizens of our district, when I say this.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission is in the process of offering formal advice regarding the best practice to deliver services to our trans residents. Officers will continue to monitor this advice against the clear direction from full council that we provide caring thoughtful and inclusive services to everyone within the law.

Oliver Forder  
Chair, Vale of White Horse District Council



# REVIEWS

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## **Original Sin: President Biden's decline, its cover-up and his disastrous choice to run again by Jake Tapper and Alex Thompson Penguin.**

Until eighteen months ago, it was likely Joe Biden would be regarded as a successful president. His administration had implemented policies putting America back to work after the pandemic, and the economy was among the world's strongest. Progressives respected him for his decency, while the international community breathed a sigh of relief that diplomacy had returned to normal under Biden.

Original Sin describes in painful detail the lies told to the American people hiding the rapid deterioration of Biden's mental and physical condition.

This devastating book charts the deception, starting as far back as 2016, that covered up just how decrepit Biden was. His family and staff thought they were saving the US from Trump, but by stubbornly deciding to fight for a second term, they delivered the presidency to Donald Trump in November 2024.

The authors, Tapper and Thompson, are respectable journalists, not gossip mongers, and they are motivated by horror that Biden's arrogance handed America to the reckless MAGA leader and his self-enriching supporters.

Biden's 'Politbureau' prioritised staying in the White House, even while their boss struggled to

complete a  
sentence and

thought Francois Mitterrand and Helmut Kohl were still alive.

The true nature of Biden's decline became apparent to the world in June 2024 during the first presidential election debate with Trump. The crisis was compounded by the three and a half weeks it then took for the Biden team to surrender to the inevitable, bowing out of the race.

Biden's family and advisors refused to ever show him the opinion polling that put him far behind Trump. By hanging on, they denied the Democratic Party the chance to hold a primary or to choose a stronger candidate than Kamala Harris. Biden still tells anyone who will listen that he would have defeated Trump, had he been the candidate. This is unfair to Harris who had only 100 days to start a presidential campaign from scratch. It is also delusional.

Given the episodes related in this carefully sourced and researched book, Democrats are at a disadvantage if they hope to accuse Trump of lying and protecting his family from scrutiny:

Biden's coterie did the same. It was particularly unhelpful of Biden to pardon his son Hunter as one of his final acts. Hunter's behaviour, as described in the book, speaks of the degenerate and privileged lifestyle of a man lacking any sense of personal responsibility, knowing his father would protect him. The authors argue that by pardoning Hunter, Biden set a standard that made it easier for Trump to pardon the hundreds of men and women who flooded the Capitol on

6 January assaulting police officers and staff and trying to destroy the heart of America's legislature.

The authors could not predict just how profoundly Trump and his Heritage Foundation-MAGA cabal would deconstruct the federal government and ignore the constitution from the moment they took power. Nor could Tapper and Thompson imagine the impact Trump 2.0 would have on the rest of the world. But the book is essential reading for those of us concerned by how power corrupts and how lies can lead to disaster.

Rebecca Tinsley

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## **A Different Kind of Power by Jacinda Arden Macmillan 2025 £25.**

Leading a country is a difficult task. Leading a country within ten years of entering elected office is even more challenging. Leading a country within ten years of entering office while dealing with a tragic terrorist incidents, difficult world leaders and while giving birth to a first child is a feat of strength. Enter Jacinda Arden, former prime minister of New Zealand, whose new book walks us through the challenges and tribulations of a world leader thrust into the limelight.

Arden's political memoirs follow almost her entire life from childhood to leaving office, recounting the trials and tribulations she experienced throughout this period. Detailing her experiences growing up in her small conservative community,



figuring out her place in the world, and her time as a Labour MP and prime minister, juggling public dissatisfaction, a livestreamed terrorist atrocity and giving birth.. It is also a reflective book, considering the direction of travel not only of New Zealand, but of the wider world, in which Ardern makes the pitch for a more compassionate and understanding nature of political debate.

Like many, it was the response to the 2022 Christchurch terrorist attacks that first brought Jacinda Ardern to my attention; her compassion, personal response and then steadfast political abilities that brought tough gun regulation to New Zealand in a matter of weeks. Her book is not only a reflection of that ability and dedication, but also her caring nature, one that has been forged by her own experiences growing up in a uniquely diverse culture.

Ardern's book manages to avoid what many memoirs and other tomes of leaders past all too often fall into the trap of. It doesn't read as if a lecture, attempting to justify unpopular decisions, lecturing the reader as to how their actions were, of course, the correct course of action and any criticism levelled is a misunderstood interpretation. Despite being a confident recount of her time in office, it is one that is unafraid to point out her own mistakes, shortcomings and things she would do differently. The humility, even going beyond levels that are, in my opinion, warranted, is a breath of fresh air.

Ardern is also unafraid to speak about issues that only a minute number of world leaders would have ever experienced. Particularly surrounding being the first elected world leader to give birth whilst in office, she speaks about all manner of challenges that only she can attest to.

Whether this was hiding her pregnancy from media attention, repeatedly answering questions about whether she would be suitable for the role of prime minister if she had a young child, and even attempting to visit clinicians without the media or her personal protection becoming aware, her words highlight just some of the extra burdens that being a strong female leader in the political world can bring, and the challenges of rising through the



ranks in what continues to be a world made for men.

I particularly enjoyed also the manner in which Arden brings herself down to the level of her readers, explaining as she goes concepts that for many international, and possibly even local, readers may not understand. Particularly when discussing her time as a 'List' MP, she takes the time to walk readers through what this means, and how it differs from being a constituency MP; one of the many quirks of a system which to outsiders can seem alien. It's this ability to understand, empathise and bring people with her which is so evident throughout the book that served her so effectively when in office.

Finally, there is an unusually positive tone that is maintained throughout the book, even when discussing harrowing national or international events. Despite the myriad challenges Ardern faced she manages to retain a strong feeling of hope on almost every page. This is not a former world leader who sounds exhausted, but one who is clearly not finished with her work, whom I am sure will continue to have a marked impact on the world.

Ardern is one of the most 'real' politicians the world has seen in a long time, and one of the most respected world leaders for a generation. A Different Kind of Power is not just a reflection of this, but an embodiment of who Ardern is as a person. A leader, a mother, a family-oriented legislator, a community member and, above all,

a real person just like any one of us. Ardern's book is a reflection of the kind of leader the world needs right now, packaged in a beautifully written and personal account that will have any reader on side. It is one of the best political memoirs I have read.

Sophie Layton

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## **The Rise and Fall of Margaret Thatcher [play]** **by Edmund Green** **Gatehouse Highgate Theatre**

There is plenty of drama in both Margaret Thatcher's rise to power and in her eventual ejection from it.

A pity therefore that this play felt at times like extracts from Hansard were being read out. The writer could perhaps have tackled either her rise or her fall, or simply condensed both parts of the script.

It is staged in the 'rise' half in 1974-75 with Edward Heath seated at a small table and other performers either offstage or sitting at the back and coming forward as needed. Heath was famously abrupt and rude (and to his credit by all accounts loathed the Tory grassroots) and is played here rather as caricature.

Heath has lost two elections and is here fast losing the confidence of MPs. The main action of the first part comprises Airey Neave persuading Thatcher to stand on the grounds that the anti-Heath right needed a champion and the most likely one - Sir Keith Joseph - had withdrawn having made a public idiot of himself with unwise speeches about the breeding habits of the working class. Indeed he became nicknamed Sir Sheath.

Neave has to convince Thatcher that a woman could stand a chance of winning but does so at such interminable length that one's attention began to wander. Neave is shown up to all kinds of discreet questioning to ascertain MPs views but there is little sense of the drama of the leadership battle, which Thatcher won helped by the candidacy of the forgotten backbencher Hugh Fraser. He took 16 votes, more than the margin by which Thatcher beat Heath.

The second half starts in the late 1980s with Thatcher at the stage's table facing mounting disquiet in

her party over the public reaction to the poll tax. To test opinion, the Heathite backbencher Sir Anthony Meyer stood against her.

He explains why here in a speech of such stupefying length - taking in his war record and immigrant antecedents - that I feared we were in for his entire life story. Little of all this really matters; Meyer stood because he was a left-wing Tory with nothing to lose and someone had to put a shot across Thatcher's bows. His 33 votes, plus 27 abstentions, were dwarfed by Thatcher's 314 but the loss of support was enough to frighten her backers.

Facing a real challenge the next year from Michael Heseltine, Thatcher - for unexplained reasons - appointed the stupendously useless Peter Morrison to run her campaign, a duty he performed by doing nothing.

Facing defeat, Thatcher rages at betrayal, and rages, and rages, I thought we'd got the point five minutes earlier by the time this tirade stopped.

There are some entertaining moments along the way, mainly concerned with Geoffrey Howe's cringe-making attempts at a humorous speech, and his wife Elspeth's efforts to inject some drama into his lethal resignation speech. There's also a neat ending as Thatcher goes and Heath suddenly re-emerges to say "rejoice, rejoice".

Despite its faults, the play will interest those who were there or who want to know more about the politics of the period.

It's arguable that the Conservatives' current plight can be traced back to this time when 'one nation' Toryism died with the Heath government (despite half-hearted attempts by John Major and David Cameron to stage brief revivals) and the Tories because an explicitly ideological and anti-European party instead of the relatively moderate and pragmatic stances they had previously taken since 1945.

A pity therefore that the play tells us what happened but little about why.

Mark Smulian

## **Blowing up Everything is Beautiful, Israel's Extermination of Gaza by James Robins Arcade Publishing New York 2025**

I presume the title of James Robins' book is a paraphrase of Amihai Eliyahu's November 2023 statement "North Gaza is more beautiful than ever. Blowing up and flattening everything is beautiful."

Let's cut to the chase; no matter how eloquent, well researched and written, brief by some standards at 156 pages, we see this almost daily, unless some other tragedy deflects the BBC News, who it seems, can only handle one story a day.

On 4 July, the world mourned the tragic loss of Diojo Jota and Andre Silva; I recall no mention on the BBC of the death of Muhannad Fadl al-Lili, a footballer for the Palestinian national team, after an Israeli airstrike that struck his family's home in the Al-Maghazi refugee camp, located in central Gaza, indeed I gave up, several times, waiting for news of Gaza, Ukraine and places scarcely heard of - Sudan, the Congo... what was the score? IDF - Nil, the hungry, queuing at a Gaza Humanitarian Foundation killing field, 30? 20?

Robins says: "The journalism collected here is a record, in real time, of a cataclysm." The crimes of Hamas and Israel need to be recorded and Robins has expanded on a string of article in New Republic to that end.

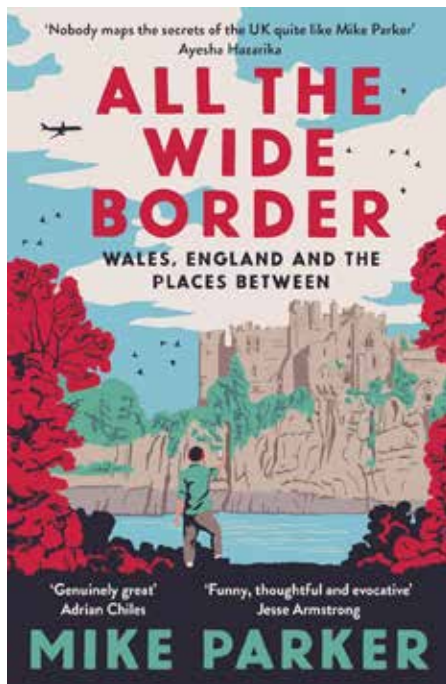
I have no time for Hamas; I regard them as responsible for the death of one of my friends. He ran a charity caring for disabled people. At some point after Hamas had secured a majority in the Palestinian Legislative Council, a group of youths came into his office demanding that he join Hamas; he told them that he was apolitical and did not wish to align with any group. The next day, a gunman came to his office reiterating the same demand. He fled Palestine; it took a while to get his wife and children out, and they became refugees in the UK. We met once but within a month I had lost all contact with him and his family; he was a broken man and my gut feeling is that he committed suicide.

What Hamas did not anticipate was the scale of the Israeli response to 7 October, though they would be accustomed to it being disproportionate. What the world did not anticipate was the scale of the disproportion.

There is at least a dual complicity of the Israeli state here. At the time of the first Intifada, UN officials in Gaza told me that there was little uptake of Islamist fundamentalism, a small following in the Al Azhar university, with its links with the Egyptian Moslem Brotherhood, but little amongst ordinary people. Hamas grew with Israel's blessing in a divide and conquer scenario, promoting them against the secular Fatah. The failure of the Oslo Accords left Fatah frustrated and corruption set in, Hamas won the last election to the Palestinian Legislative Council in 2006, winning 73 of 136 seats. Israel, or at least its military intelligence, was well aware of the planned 7 October breakout, but chose to ignore it. Israel's promotion and sustaining of Hamas is probably the biggest mistake in the country's history. However, for the Israeli right-wing Hamas is a predictable opportunity.

Roughly a quarter of the way through the book we encounter Raphael Lemkin, whose ideas led to the 1948 Genocide Convention. Robins argues that the compromises on the road to the Convention make it a flawed document, but it is the one the South Africans used before the International Criminal Court. The workings of the International Court of Justice are analysed in it reaching decisions, as is Lemkin's theoretical basis in the epilogue underlying the shortcomings of the system.

Unfortunately, the ceasefire was a sham, something the Israelis had to do to keep Joe Biden onside until he was out of the way. The killing goes on and even the British government has had cause to complain. What the book, and the world generally, lacks is an analysis of how Israel got into this position. The Shoah is only part of the picture; the destruction of Jewish communities in the Middle East in the wake of the creation of the state of Israel is perhaps more important, as it is their children, treated as an underclass in their new home, whose fears underpin the Israeli



right wing's electoral base. A lot of forgiveness will be needed on both sides if we are not to be back here again in another decade.

Stewart Rayment

## **All the Wide Border: Wales, England and the Places Between by Mike Parker Harper North 2024 £10.99**

The Welsh border is the most intoxicating landscape I know, and Mike Parker is a companionable guide to it. Immune to the tendency to complain that things aren't what they used to be – when were they ever? – he is interested in the towns and countryside as he finds them today.

Parker made the journeys he describes in this book during the Covid pandemic, a period that may turn out to be little represented in our literature. An English-born Welsh Nationalist, he found the more collectivist traditions of his adopted country served people better in that time of trial.

Along some stretches of the border, it's easy to forget which country you are in. I remember once coming down off the hills to Kington and being almost surprised to find myself in a red-brick Midland town with Burton beer in all the pubs. Further north, around Chester in particular, Parker shows the border is still a hard reality that affects the economy and

society on both its sides.

Much as I enjoyed *All the Wide Border*, it's a reminder of how personal our reaction to places can be. The first chapter takes you to a place I've been many times: the country west of the Stiperstones up to Shropshire's border with Powys. For me it means the remains of the lead-mining industry; the children's books of Malcolm Saville; Ronnie Lane and one of his rock star mates, down to use the studio at Lane's place a couple of fields into Wales, playing unannounced at a remote pub; the death at a farm of the foster child Dennis O'Neill, which led both to the 1948 Children's Act and Agatha Christie's play *The Mousetrap*. Parker's chapter mentions none of these, yet I still found it as interesting as any in the book.

Jonathan Calder

## **How to Win an Information War: The Propagandist Who Outwitted Hitler by Peter Pomerantsev Faber 2025 £10.99**

In September 1941 German civilians began to pick up enticing new radio broadcasts. In the salty language of an army veteran from Berlin, 'Der Chef' complained bitterly about food rationing and excoriated leading Nazis as inefficient and sexually corrupt.

"It's a pity we can't cut our meat from the buttocks of the SS."

But *Der Chef* was not a disaffected insider: he was in reality Peter Hans Seckelmann, a German political exile broadcasting from Woburn Abbey in Bedfordshire under the control of the British black propagandist Sefton Delmer.

It is Delmer's story that Pomerantsev tells – his boyhood in Germany during the First World War; his time as a journalist there during the Thirties when he became close to the Nazi leadership; his difficulties in proving to the British authorities that he was loyal and that his skills should be used.

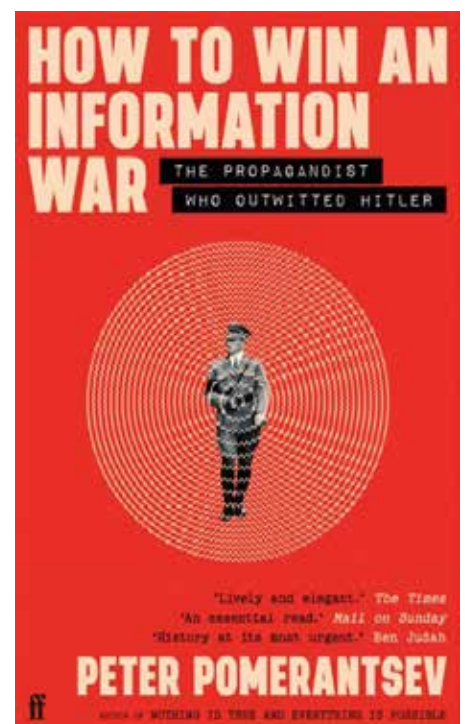
Though *Der Chef* was a crude character, he was used in subtle ways. When he complained, for instance, that some German civilians were getting round rationing by buying clothes on

the black market, his broadcast was designed to normalise this behaviour, encourage more people to take it up and speed the breakdown of the rationing system.

As the war went on, Delmer invented more characters and radio stations. Father Elmar – a real priest, though Austrian not German as claimed – broadcast religious programmes about the sins of the Nazi regime, emboldening believers with their own doubts about Hitler. And Delmer devised a whole station that combined subtle propaganda with a supply of genuine news about the home front and the welfare of troops that no German station could match. Ian Fleming, for instance, then working in naval intelligence, fed him the results of the U-boat football league. Another writer, Muriel Spark, was on Delmer's staff and later drew on this experience for her novel *The Hothouse* by the East River.

Pomerantsev shares Delmer's experience of growing up in both liberal and authoritarian cultures. He is the son of political dissidents from Kyiv, was born in Ukraine and grew up in London. Early in this century, he lived in Moscow and worked as a television producer. He sometimes draws parallels between Putin's propaganda and that deployed by the Nazis or Delmer. His readers may be left wondering if some of Delmer's tactics could be adopted by those seeking to counter the far right today.

Jonathan Calder





## **Glad to the Brink of Fear: A Portrait of Ralph Waldo Emerson by James Marcus Princeton University Press 2024**

“Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist,” wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson, who in his most famous essay *Self-Reliance* and others, penned sayings that endure to this day. “In every work of genius we recognise our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty.” But in the same essay on nonconformity, Emerson poured scorn upon associations, even those which were obviously worthy, including groups of well-meaning philanthropists and abolitionists. His attitude was to change over the years.

This book is a scholarly study that reads like a magazine article. Marcus, a writer and translator, injects himself frequently into this work, with an informality of style “I am writing these lines on a December afternoon” . . . “I walk down the steep road to the lake . . . I set off around the lake” that at first surprises, but ultimately charms the reader. Marcus describes himself as a secular Jew who likes to watch Joel Osteen, the American preacher and college dropout who preaches ‘Prosperity gospel’ to a massive following. He tells of how he discovered Emerson during a vulnerable period in his own life.

Mentioning how Emerson, whom he refers to as Waldo wrote that he read “for the lusters,” for the high points, the key

passages in books, Marcus relates that this study of Emerson similarly focuses on the most revealing episodes, “the essays and lectures that electrified me the most.”

Part of a long line of Unitarian ministers, Emerson had been destined for the pulpit. But in 1832 he realised that he believed that he could no longer honestly celebrate the Eucharist, not believing in the Real Presence in the elements of bread and wine. He gave a sermon in which he tried to justify his position, preaching that “the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost.” The Society of Proprietors decided to dismiss him anyway. Soon afterwards Emerson went away on a trip to Europe. He had lost a secure position as pastor but would take on the professions of writer and lecturer.

The many contradictions in Emerson are noted: the man who could write “The only reward of virtue is virtue; the only way to have a friend is to be one” turned against his younger friend and protégé Henry David Thoreau, shutting him out after first welcoming and encouraging him.

Thoreau would write sadly of Emerson as the “one other with whom I had ‘solid seasons’ . . . but I had no more society there.” Like Emerson’s father, his first wife and his brother John years before, Thoreau died young of tuberculosis. Although grieved by the loss, Emerson managed in a funeral oration to give a tribute to Thoreau that sounded at times less like praise than blame: “as for taking his arm, I should as soon think of taking the arm of an elm-tree.”

A more important

Emersonian failing was his failure at first to endorse the work of the Abolitionists. In the 1830s he was under pressure to speak up against slavery, but resisted until he was shocked into making a “watery and unsatisfying address” by the murder of Elijah Lovejoy, a minister and abolitionist newspaper editor. In this speech he likened the sins of the North to those of the slaveowners, and in his journal he denounced antislavery rallies.

A change came in 1844. Emerson had been asked to address the Women’s Anti-Slavery Association of Concord, and in preparation he studied Thomas Clarkson’s *History of the African Slave Trade*. Emerson could not help but be moved by its stories of the brutal treatment of slaves, its fold-out illustration of how 454 Africans had been crammed below decks on a Liverpool-based slave ship.

His speech on 1 August 1844, condemned slavery and also blamed the Northern consumer, ironically stating: “The sugar they raised was excellent: nobody tasted blood in it. The coffee was fragrant; the tobacco was incense; the brandy made nations happy; the cotton clothed the world. What! All raised by these men, and no wages? Excellent! What a convenience.”

After that for Emerson there was a slowly increasing commitment to the Abolitionist cause, interrupted by a long stay in Europe in 1847 and 1849, a time when Chartists were rebelling in Britain, mobs driving out King Louis-Philippe in France. Emerson both admired and feared revolution. Great change was happening in his own country, with the

Mexican-American war giving the US an excuse to annex land that would later become Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming, a change that he predicted would end badly, “Mexico will poison us.”

Nothing was more influential in committing Emerson to the Abolitionist cause than the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, requiring that US marshals and their deputies in free states assist in the return of escaped slaves or pay a large fine.

Emerson regarded runaway slaves as heroes, and this law as barbarism. His address of 3 May 1851, described negro slavery as the “greatest calamity in the universe,” and charged that the usual assumptions about his countrymen as being freedom-loving was “hollow American brag.” He followed this up with major addresses in New York and Philadelphia. He welcomed the Civil War, when it broke out in 1861, as an effort to finally end slavery.

The last decade of Emerson’s life was marred by increasing dementia - the biographer suspects Alzheimer’s disease - which according to his daughter began during the 1860s, when he was in the height of his lecturing career. He had to read texts where he had once spoken off the cuff; Ellen would sew the pages of his addresses together to keep him from getting them muddled, writing “Poor man, how he struggles for words! The simplest escape him.”

In 1876 he responded to an invitation with “an old man fears most his best friends... I have grown silent to my own household, & cannot afflict dear friends with

my tied tongue.” Death, when it came, was from pneumonia, brought on by a walk in the rain’. Family and friends came to say goodbye, but only family was with him at the end.

Christine Graf

Contd from Page 17...

What we need instead is a genuine reimagining of localism, one that strengthens local councils, enhances community engagement, and builds capacity rather than stripping it away. That means reversing the funding cuts that have crippled many councils over the past decade. It means giving communities real power over planning, budgets, and services. And it means recognising that local government is not an inefficient nuisance to be streamlined but a vital pillar of our democratic infrastructure.

The committee system is not perfect. It can be slower, and it relies on councillors being committed and well-prepared. But at its best, it embodies the very principles that devolution is supposed to represent: local voice, shared power, and open government. In a time of growing centralisation, it is more important than ever to defend and expand these values, Liberal values.

From Kingston’s experience, we know that inclusive governance works. It builds trust. It strengthens democracy. And most importantly, it delivers better and sustainable outcomes for the communities we serve.

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Sabah Hamed is the Liberal Democrat portfolio holder for adult social care and health at Kingston upon Thames

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## Monday

These long hot summer days remind me of the Rutstock Festival, regarded by many historians (though not Dominic Sandboy in his *What My Housemaster Told Me About the Sixties*) as the high-water mark of that era of peace and love. Certainly, I have never worn flowers in my hair since. Yet those halcyon days were not without controversy, and it fell to me, as chief cook and bottle-washer of the festival, to deal with the various hooahas. The chant from the stage of “Death to the Duke of Rutland’s Militia”, for instance, kept the yellow press in a froth for a clear fortnight. For the record, and despite what was written at the time, I did not lead the chant (though I may have joined in).

## Tuesday

Is it asking too much to expect our party’s leader and president to keep a secret? It seems it is. The president recently, on his electric blog, quoted the leader to the effect that the intelligence services like to recruit orphans. (This is something I have been at pains to keep under my hat, and that with the firm encouragement of His Majesty’s Intelligence Services.) As a result and ever since, my Home for Well-Behaved Orphans has been besieged by shifty types from every enemy this country possesses – no doubt they are keen to cast an eye over what may be their future opposition in the espionage game. Thank goodness the little inmates are now safely in Cornwall for their annual holiday at Trescothick Bay. This year I sent Meadowcroft off on the charabanc with them to lend Matron a hand. It seemed wise to remove him from the ambit, and indeed the thrall, of Freddie and Fiona, who spoil him. I would rather have Meadowcroft spoiling the orphans.

## Wednesday

Another advantage of Meadowcroft being in Cornwall is that it’s now safe to invite Clegg to the Hall. I’m afraid my gardener has never forgiven our former leader for setting light to the collection of cacti he spent so many years gathering from the arid south of Rutland. Over dinner, Clegg is his usual candid self: “I’ve been looking at the money people pay artists and writers. It’s only a few thousand quid each, but it adds up, and my plan is that it should go to me instead. I shall help myself to the artists and writers’ work and feed it into a computer, which will jumble it up and produce versions of its own. Obviously, I’ll make these versions free at first, but when all the writers and artists have given up, I’ll be able to charge what I like.” I suggest to Clegg that he pay the artists and writers for their work, but he explains that this would kill his business overnight.

## Thursday

It was a downturn in world pork pie prices that led me to sell off some of the Estate cottages, one of which is currently occupied at weekends by Freddie and Fiona. I now bitterly regret that decision, as these properties are not available to more useful people, such as gamekeepers, itinerant philosophers and wintering county scorers. Still, I don’t suppose F&F will live here

# Lord Bonkers’ Diary

for ever – at least, not if I have anything to do with it.

This evening, returning from a day at Westminster, I run into one of those Liberal Reform types at St Pancras. “What is it you lot believe in,” I ask him. “We’re serious about power,” comes the reply. I then point out most people in the party are serious about power, only to be met with the retort: “Ah, but we’re serious about being serious.”

## Friday

Have you come across a book called *The Stilton Path*? It purports to be the true story of a couple who walked all the way round Rutland Water because they had lost their money and one of them had the galloping lurgi, but I didn’t believe a word of it. For instance, I will admit that my old friend Ruttie, the Rutland Water Monster, can be playful, even a little naughty, but I have never known her “attack” anyone. Similarly, the author did not witness an “escape attempt” by the WBOs but a gymnastic display using a vaulting horse of the boys’ own design. And before anyone accuses me of sexism, let me emphasise that the girls were in the attic putting the finishing touches to a glider they too had dreamt up. Finally, the Wise Woman of Wing has never “put a curse on” anyone, though I admit her language can tend to the salty if you don’t pay within the stated 14 days.

## Saturday

I spend the morning drafting a memorandum to some of the leading Liberal Democrats in Oxfordshire. You have probably heard that rewilding is all the rage, and it happened that I caught an old television programme about an archaeological dig in the county. The bones they found! Elephants. Mammoths. Bison. Lions. Imagine the tourists they would attract if they reintroduced these charismatic species to the Cherwell Valley. To soothe modern sensibilities, I add a section on health and safety. In it, I point out that we need only worry about residents being eaten if the rate of devourment is higher among Liberal Democrat voters than the population as a whole.

## Sunday

Reasoning that “Nature is God’s living, visible garment” and “malt does more than Milton can to justify God’s ways to man”, I often take a turn about my estate and then call in at the Bonkers Arms after Divine Service at St Asquith’s. In my covers, I come across an ill-kempt fellow who appears to be living in a tent. (By coincidence, the Revd Hughes’s text this morning was “Behold, Esau my brother is a hairy man, and I am a smooth man.”) In our conversation it transpires that he came here for the Rutstock Festival all those years ago and has never “got his shit together” to leave. I can hardly expect him to afford a rent, but I emphasise that if he wishes to remain here then he must take on a challenging Focus round. I also suggest he pitches his tent in the garden of Freddie and Fiona’s cottage, where he will be much more comfortable and able to play his harmonica without disturbing my deer.

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