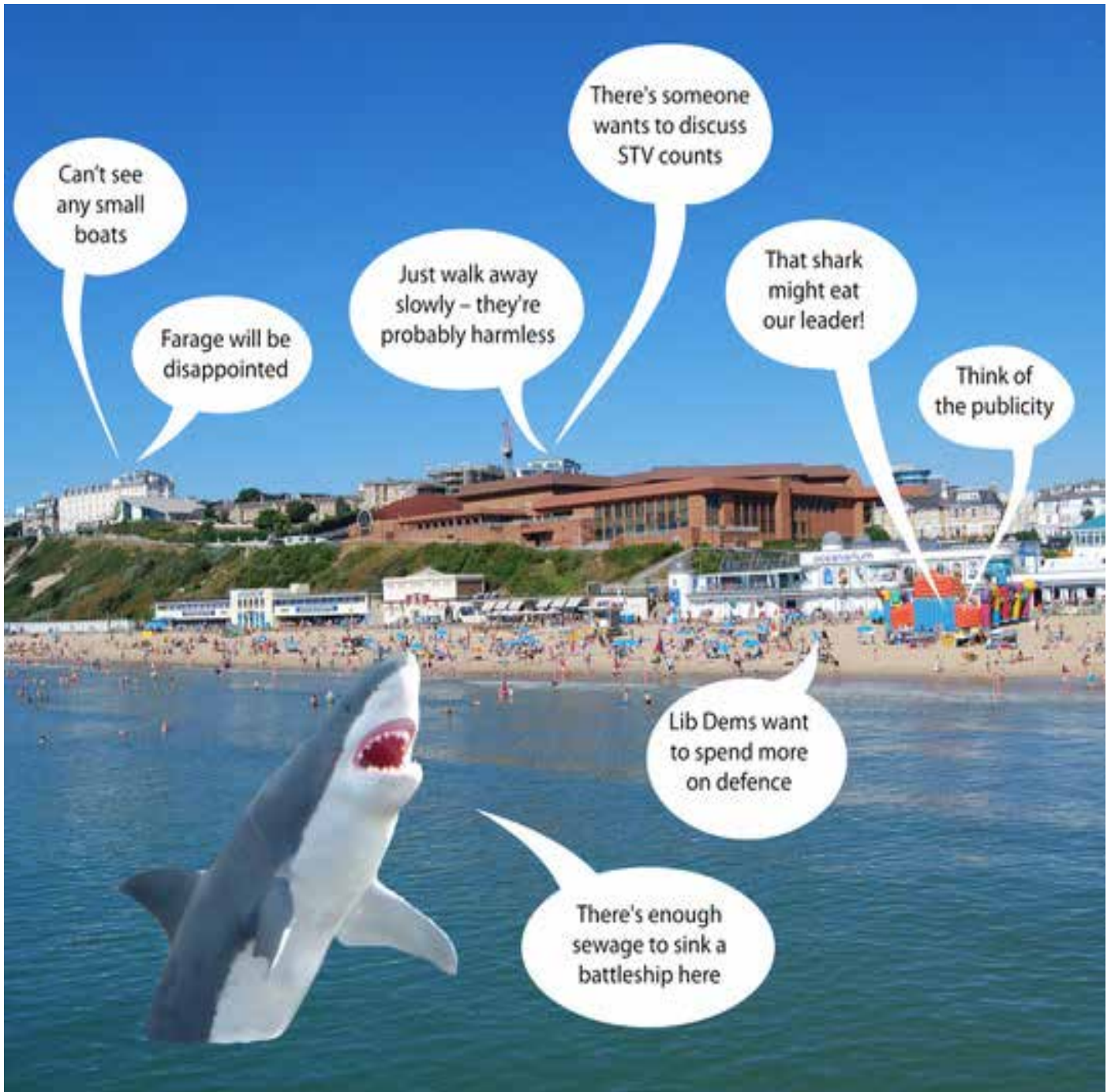


# liberator



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- 🐟 A policy review for hedgehogs or foxes - David Grace
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## LIBERATOR

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# COMMENTARY

## A LOW RUMBLING SOUND

They're quiet but getting slowly louder - mutterings in the party and the parliamentary party that with 72 MPs and an unpopular government the Liberal Democrats should have both a higher profile and be sticking it to other parties.

It's true that - as party president Mark Pack has pointed out in his regular analysis of polls - there is almost no crossover between Lib Dem inclined and Reform inclined voters. The latter's supporters are not going to vote Lib Dem and vice versa.

The logic of this surely is that the Lib Dems can afford to raise their profile by offending the sensibilities of Reform voters with minimal risk, and may benefit by shoring up support among those who would never vote for Reform anyway.

With the Conservatives having become 'Reform lite' such an approach could also bring benefits by peeling away the Tories' now almost defunct 'one nation' wing.

So why the muttering, now loud enough to earn a feature on the Politico website? <https://www.politico.eu/article/uk-ed-davey-liberal-democrats-knows-fun-kayak-media-nigel-farage-boris-johnson/>

It's partly a feeling that a party with 18 times as many MPs as Reform ought to manage a higher public profile than the latter, but isn't through an excess of caution about offending people.

This is admittedly punctuated by occasional dramatic announcements, like Ed Davey's boycott of the state dinner for Donald Trump. These are fine as far as they go but mark an odd combination of an abundance of caution sporadically thrown aside for provocative statements.

Another cause of mutterings is the party continued failure to define itself to the public, a problem hardly helped by its recent habit of parliamentary abstentions. The party hardly wants a reputation for not being sure what it thinks.

The final cause of muttering arises from new MPs having found their feet. A year ago most did not mind being firmly led in their new roles. Now some at least resent Daveybunker inhabitants throwing their weight around.

There is no discernible move against Davey, not least his prestige from 2024 remains high, the vast majority of MPs are first timers with seats to defend and no obvious successor - credible or otherwise - has emerged. Some will recall Jackie Ballard running for leader too early and promptly losing her seat.

Little appears immediately perilous for a party that can turn in a mass of gains in local elections and maintain a respectable showing in opinion polls. That may not last for ever if its profile stays so low.

## NOT SO SMART

What is the point of Lisa Smart?

As Lib Dem home affairs spokesperson she caused widespread dismay last May with a weak response to anti-migrant sentiments from the government and Reform.

Instead of a principled liberal reply she talked about "taking steps to fix our broken immigration system" and "[making] it easier to recruit British workers".

In September came her post on Lib Dem Voice in support of identity cards, which drew a deservedly large and overwhelmingly hostile response.

This managed the double of being both wrong and bad politics. A steady stream of media briefings from cabinet members show that Labour's obsessional hatred of individual liberty is alive and well and that it wants to resurrect identity cards - seen off by the Coalition - but now dressed up as 'digital ID'.

No doubt citizens who hold these will be required to show them on demand to the police. Maybe those that refuse could expect to be banged up for 90 days without charge - something Labour wished to do 20 years ago for broadly defined terrorism suspects - later reduced to 42 days and abandoned when the House of Lords rejected it.

This time ID cards are purportedly to control immigration, the Home Office's blend of incompetence and cruelty having failed.

Fighting this is an obvious liberal cause, and if Smart chooses to throw this chance away by supporting Labour it is likely that Reform - maybe even the Tories - will take up the cause of civil liberty against it, however hypocritical that might seem.

Labour's latest attempt to turn the UK into a "show me your papers" society offers the Lib Dems an opportunity to make clear that people behaving lawfully in a public place should not have to justify why they are there, and the state should not intrude.

One might have thought the holder of the Lib Dem home affairs portfolio would grasp this. Apparently not.

Lib Dem MP Alistair Carmichael denounced Starmer on Bluesky over "authoritarian ID cards" only to find Smart advocating them. As the former MP David Howarth posted in response on Lib Dem Voice: "Of course, the government has no intention of setting up a purely voluntary scheme. As in 2005-6, it will want to move rapidly to compulsion. And of course as in 2005-6, we should oppose them."

Liberty can never be Labour's issue. Members might hope it would be a Lib Dem one.



# RADICAL BULLETIN

## ELECTIVE CHAIR

Steff Aquarone has won a resounding victory for parliamentary party chair in a shot across Ed Davey's bow.

The North Norfolk MP beat Frome's Anna Sabine by 44 to 27. The latter had tried not to be portrayed as the establishment candidate but as Davey's parliamentary private secretary that was hard to sustain.

Last year front bencher Lisa Smart was parachuted unopposed as chair while new MPs were still finding their feet; enough this year were determined there would be a choice.

The chair is supposed to be a back bencher, elected by MPs and is not a leadership appointment (as indeed long ago the post of chief whip was elected).

Aquarone's 44 votes is enough to have some front benchers among it, suggesting dissatisfaction including with the Daveybunker's power runs deeper than might have been thought.

Part of the chair's role is to speak truth unto power, so Davey may hear rather more than in the past.

## 76 LORDS NOT LEAPING MUCH

The election for Lib Dem Lords leader saw Jeremy Purvis comfortably beat Kath Pinnock by the order of 52 votes to 19.

Purvis, a well-regarded foreign policy specialist, now heads a fast diminishing band of peers who may struggle to keep up their usual aim of punching above their weight in the chamber.

This numbers problem goes back to 2015, the last time the party was allowed to appoint a batch of peers in double figures (11), taking the total to 109.

Subsequent general election disasters saw no new peers created until Ed Davey was recently allowed to nominate Caroline Pidgeon, Shaffaq Mohammed, and Mark Pack.

Other parties meanwhile claimed that the Lib Dems were ludicrously over represented in the Lords back when the party had very few MPs and have remained unsympathetic to the idea of more Lib Dem peers.

This is despite deaths, defections and retirements having dragged down the noble numbers to only 76, leaving far fewer than before to share the burden of work.

Since peerages tend to be doled out as rewards towards the end of political or public service careers, many incumbents are ageing or in poor health.

Nor do the Lords' arcane working practices help with longer and later hours than are normal in the Commons.

One observer said: "We desperately need fresh - and younger - blood so the older peers and those who are simply exhausted can stand back without feeling guilty."

Purvis is thought to be seeking reinforcements in

particular to cover the health, legal and work and pensions portfolios.

Those who modestly let drop they would 'make themselves available' if called to be ennobled find they are referred to Davey's powerful coterie of staffers who are thought to carry great influence over such decisions, more perhaps than Purvis himself, although he was not due to fully take over until September.

An experiment 20 years ago saw a peers list elected at conference from which the leader was supposed to draw nominees for the Lords. It was used only once, by Charles Kennedy, and then fell into disuse returning things to the bad old days of opaque selection processes based on patronage. Suggestions that members of the party could 'self-nominate' have got nowhere.

## INSOMNIA CURE

Amid the hyperventilating self-congratulations to be found in the Lib Dems' Reports to Conference, the odd nugget can be seen. Liberator reads them so you don't have to.

For example, not a word is there on membership, with the exception of a brief reference in the report of the Federal Audit and Scrutiny Committee (FASC): "Membership remained static and work was progressing on testing new approaches to membership development."

The party used to trumpet its membership, but then became secretive about when it started falling during the last parliament, until turnout in the 2022 party president election revealed it to then be 62,751. If it's "remained static" in the year following a 380% increase in the number of MPs it sounds like some more detailed report ought to have been made on why.

FASC is also reviewing "the party's management and approach to legal cases" although nothing had emerged by the time the report was written.

The party has lost some costly cases, such as that of Natalie Bird, and won some but with an uncertain ability to recover costs, as with Jo Hayes.

Meanwhile the Federal People Development Committee has carried out an annual review of affiliated organisations. Lack of space must have prevented it from reporting that the onerous bureaucratic requirements now imposed have already led to the loss of one small but important AO, the Liberal Democrat Friends of Seekers of Sanctuary, which found it impossible to operate under these (Liberator 428).

Meanwhile, the row over England failing to adopt the 'F10' changes to the candidates system remains unresolved, with English party chair Caroline Pidgeon optimistically reporting: "A considerable number of questions and issues were raised at the [English] meeting and, by the time of this conference, a Q&A document will have been provided for all English

Council members to offer the responses required, and to look to find a way forward.”

## PERILS OF STV

The late Colin Rosenstiel would no doubt be gratified to know that he is still involved in controversy over the finer points of counting the single transferable vote (STV).

Party president Mark Pack reports to conference that an unfortunate problem was spotted after some changes were agreed to the party’s federal committee election rules last spring,

Many years ago, when Rosenstiel was asked to draw these up, the rules on STV counts were required only to deal with one type of diversity characteristic (presumably that of women).

With multiple diversity quotas now needing to be accommodated, the counting system specified could not cope, and nor could a number of e-voting suppliers.

The new wording instead requires the federal returning officer to publish the method to be used for each election.

This could open the door to interminable disputes as to whether the returning officer has picked the right method, generated by those for whom STV counts are a sort of electoral adventure playground.

Meanwhile, for those that enjoy this type of thing, the Federal Appeals Panel has ruled that four counts for casual vacancies on federal committees used an incorrect method.

The case was brought by members Toby Keynes, David Barnsdale and Mark Johnston against returning officer David Crowther.

They alleged that the counting method did not conform to the election regulations as some candidates were removed at the outset, with a knock-on impacts on the results.

Got that? For reasons too labyrinthine to go into here the FAP decide the appellants were right and gave an interpretation of how future counts should be conducted but that it was too late to reverse the results.

## MYSTERY ISLAND

Amid the plethora of fringe meetings at conference there is one on the “Relationship between Cyprus, UK and EU. Rising vet bills and animal care.”

This seems an eccentric combination of subjects, and has a curious backer too in the shape of something called the Cyprus Liberal and Democratic Movement.

According to Liberator’s contact in Cyprus the only body with a similar name was a social club for right-wing libertarian business figures.

The Cyprus Liberal and Democratic Movement is also unknown to both Liberal International and Renew Europe, neither of which show any members in either half of the island. ALDE lists two Cypriot member parties but neither with this name.

A Google search for “Cyprus Liberal and Democratic Movement” returned only the Lib Dem conference listing.

## LOCAL HEROES

Lib Dem councillors have been left angered by the failure of Federal Conference Committee to give them a speaking slot at conference, especially in light of the party’s local government successes

last May.

The strange thing about this is that giving councillors a slot would not have been an innovation but rather following normal practice at the last several conferences.

It prompted a pained remonstrance from Joe Harris, leader of the Lib Dem Group at the Local Government Association and Heather Kidd, chair of the Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors.

One suspicion is that the lack of a speaking councillor arises from the parliamentary party monopolising speaking slots now there are so many of them. Many though owe their seats to spade work done earlier by councillors.

Peace talks saw party HQ commit to “a strong local government focus” at the conference rally and in future to keynote speeches by councillors and a double page feature on them in the conference directory.

## SILENT WHISTLES

The Lib Dem 2024 manifesto pledged to create an ‘Office of the Whistleblower’ with new legal protections, but no such thing as yet exists within the party, the one place where it has the power to turn this into reality.

Complaints have been made that the 2023 conference was told a new working party had been set up to update the whistleblowing policy, but nothing visible has happened.

Reports to Conference contains only a cryptic reference from the Federal People Development Committee: “Our Safeguarding and Welfare working group continues to put the final touches to an updated whistleblowing policy. The document requires the input of other committees and federal staff before being finalised.”

Federal Council was told at its August meeting that this policy might turn up by November.

## MAN OF MANY PARTS

The political career of Chris Twells can truly be said to be without parallel. Having managed to be elected as a Lib Dem councillor simultaneously on Cotswold and Salford councils, Twells said the Lib Dems expelled him for this unusual feat, after which he changed his name by deed poll to Chris Green as he felt dogged by controversy.

As Green, he reappeared fighting a by-election in Abermaw, Gwynedd, for the Pirate Party. Welsh regulations though require candidates to declare membership of any political party within the preceding 12 months.

In the case of Green/ Twells this amounted to the Conservatives, Gloucestershire Independents, Green Party, Mebyon Kernow, Reform UK and the continuing Liberal Party.

He told Liberator that he runs a data processing business for various political parties “and generally it makes it easier to oil the wheels if I am a member of said party”. He said he would also be happy to rejoin the Lib Dems. Whether this is reciprocated is unclear.

Green received 11 votes in Abermaw, though this exceeded the Lib Dems’ total of five. An independent won.

# NEW VOTERS TO REACH

## People aged 16 and 17 will soon be voting - about time, says Harvey Jones

Earlier this year, Warwickshire County Council saw an unexpected leadership battle after the Reform group leader stood down for health reasons.

The result? A tie - between the Lib Dem Jerry Roodhouse and Reform's deputy, George Finch. Thanks to the Tories abstention, the tie was broken in favour of Reform by the council's chairman.

The election of George Finch does pose an interesting question - how young is too young for politics?

Finch turned 19 between polling day and his election, becoming the youngest council leader in the UK.

Unlike your average teenager, Finch now controls a budget of more than half-a-billion pounds, assets of £1.5bn, and services for 600,000 people.

The reaction to his appointment was mixed. Many were critical of giving someone relatively young so much power, especially with no prior leadership or political experience.

Finch perhaps hasn't helped Reform's image of being the dynamic, cost-cutting, populist powerhouse after opting to hire political assistants after complaining about council bureaucracy.

But if we are going to criticise him or his leadership, let's focus on what they do, not who they are. Young people have a space in local government, and ensuring they have the tools, knowledge and skills to succeed is vital.

This is particularly important given another George Finch is much more likely after the Government's extension of the franchise to 16- and 17-year-olds.

Like the appointment of the UK's youngest council leader, the idea of votes at 16 tends to attract similar criticisms: "how will they know who to vote for?", "what experience do they have?", "won't they just stay at home?", or "don't they all just love Farage because he's on TikTok?"

Don't forget, it's not a wholly new thing for the UK. Scotland gave 16- and 17-year-olds the right to vote in the 2014 independence referendum and the 2016 Scottish election, with Wales following suit a few years later.

Scotland in particular gives us some insight into how young voters behave. More than 100,000 registered to vote in the independence referendum, with 97% who voted saying they'd vote in future elections, according to the Electoral Commission.

Turnout is hard to estimate exactly, but according to ICM three-quarters of the youngest voters cast their ballot in 2014, compared to 54% of 18-24 year olds, suggesting that the new group of voters understood the task, and were keen to take part.

This was helped by concerted efforts by local authorities to register young people, with electoral registration officers visiting schools in some areas to talk about how it works.

Information packs were also provided to schools to help teachers improve their pupils' political literacy. Research from Edinburgh University found that children who discussed the referendum in class had more confidence talking about political issues than those who didn't.

Two years later, at their first Scottish election, they were the age group most aware of how to vote and online registration, and 99% of those surveyed said they found it easy to complete a ballot paper - not always easy in an additional-member system.

Research from across Europe has shown similar trends. Findings collated by UK in a Changing Europe shows that when 16- and 17-year-olds got the vote in local elections in Austria and Norway, they were more likely to vote than the next age bracket.

This isn't to say that the same thing will happen organically in England. The Government will need to find a way to improve access to political education across the board at a time when school budgets and timetables are equally as tight.

Emphasising the transferable skills from other subjects - assessing sources for reliability, or understanding persuasive writing - would be a fantastic place to start.

Following Scotland's lead and helping them navigate process is just as important, especially for voter ID. Many young voters won't have applied for their provisional driving licence, and according to the 2021 Census, there are still more than 2.0m under 15s without a passport.

But beyond the data, there's one critical thing to remember: young people have the same experiences as anyone else.

These 16 and 17 year olds are paid a lower minimum wage than everyone else, entering a job market that is struggling across the board. Many will be working alongside their studies, trying to save for their first car or an extra pot for university. Some will be moving away from home to train for a life in the armed forces.

They also know the strain our public services are feeling. They'll be at the sharp end of financial pressures their schools are facing, feeling the reduction in library or youth centre opening hours, seeing the impact of mental health waiting lists first-hand, and caring for elderly relatives let down by a social care system bursting at the seams.

For me, these experiences matter just as much as, if not more than, any lengthy CV or years of service to a political party. If that doesn't earn them the vote, what will?

---

Harvey Jones is chair of the Young Liberals

# LABOUR IN PAIN

## The government's performance is the antithesis of a sound economy, says Sarah Olney

July marked a year of this Labour government. The new faces in Parliament brought a sense of optimism to the House of Commons chamber and to the country, but ministers spent the first half of this tenure bemoaning the economic disaster which the former Conservative government left them.

This would have been an understandable gripe to raise had the second six months of Labour's stewardship not consisted of political and economic chaos as a consequence of their misguided budget and attempted cuts to disability benefits.

While undoubtedly the current government were left with a mess to clear up, their actions and policies have only deepened the economic crisis facing the UK.

The continued resets and recent background reshuffle around Number 10 marks an admission from the prime minister that the government's economic management has been unsuccessful and chaotic.

Last year's budget announcement provided the government with the opportunity to restore public confidence in Labour's management of the country's finances, with doubts over the party's ability to oversee a strong national economy clouding over them since their last term in power. However, with the government's approval ratings reaching a UK record low, and falling, it is fair to say that this opportunity has not been grasped.

The holes in the chancellor's budget were clear to see from the get go, and these fears have materialised in practice over the past year. Since October, countless businesses in my constituency have told me that Labour's economic policies have been actively hostile to growth and have left them questioning their business' viability. Across the country, our high streets have been hit, with closed and out of business signs becoming a familiar sight.

The sense of optimism surrounding the government's election last year has well and truly evaporated. Instead of rescuing the country from the economic turmoil the Conservatives left, they are deepening the problems. This is the antithesis of sound economic policy.

The Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Relief Scheme had been a lifeline to many local businesses over the recent years, and the Labour government's announcement that this relief would be nearly halved has impacted our stores and shops significantly.

As I recently raised in the chamber, the hospitality sector has shed nearly 70,000 jobs since last October. This works out as an astounding 3.2% of all jobs in the sector and is 266% higher than the number of jobs lost in the overall economy, which is still at 1.2%. These figures lay bare the slow dismantling of the hospitality sector as a direct result of this government's policies.

Small businesses are the driving power of our economy, at the centre of our local communities, and

they create the jobs we all rely on. However, thousands of local businesses, including many in the hospitality sector, will still feel the damaging impact of the National Insurance increase.

Liberal Democrats have voted against Labour's job tax at every turn, as we can see the damage it has done to our local businesses.

The Government's jobs tax has proven an unmitigated disaster. Countless small businesses were already at the brink of collapse and this growth-crushing tax hike has only added to the pain.

Whether they were aware of it or not, the government's decision to raise the NICs rate while also reducing the salary threshold on which it is levied, has significantly raised the cost of employing part-time workers, delivering a disproportionately large blow to the hospitality sector.

It is high time that the chancellor realised that this tax rise is self-defeating, denying people opportunities to earn a living and risks sending even more businesses to the wall.

Ahead of the November Budget, the government needs to look around and see the boarded-up shop fronts and deserted high streets and realise their plan for the economy simply isn't working. Only by scrapping this jobs tax can we release businesses from these huge burdens and generate the growth needed to rebuild our public services and protect family finances.

While the government embraces a sort of stoic realism in their economic policies, this could be better characterised as pessimistic mismanagement. When we have challenged the government to be bold and seek other forms of income to boost public finances, ministers have dismissively asked how the Liberal Democrats would fare any better after inheriting the mess left by the Tories.

However, when we urge the government to consider alternate revenue raisers such as increasing the Digital Service Tax to put a stop to effective tax breaks on the wealthiest, doubling the rate of Remote Gaming Duty from 21% to 42%, and reversing the Conservative cuts to the 'banks levy', these suggestions fall on deaf ears.

With the Conservatives disappearing as a political force, it has been the Liberal Democrats who will be providing robust opposition and the voice of reason in Parliament, and it is vital that our economic calls for change are heard and implemented to provide a lifeline for our local businesses and SMEs across the country.

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Sarah Olney is Liberal Democrat MP for Richmond Park and spokesperson on the Cabinet Office.



# A REVIEW TO DISAPPOINT HEDGEHOGS AND FOXES

## The Liberal Democrat policy review fails to provide the 'vision thing', says David Grace

This document is not for a hedgehog. As a fox, I should like it. Isaiah Berlin divided thinkers into two categories, foxes who want to know a little about a lot and hedgehogs who want to know a lot about a little. You occasionally meet someone (probably at conference) who thinks they know a lot about a lot. Which animal is that? A wild bore.

I'm not really sure what motivated Ed Davey and the Federal Policy Committee to commission this review. Before a general election the conference is asked to approve a pre-manifesto but after a general election why a policy review? The Tories need one because they have no idea what they stand for these days and nor does anyone else, other than kneejerk prejudice against immigrants. Labour needs one because while they planned to win a general election, they did not plan for government, other than vague popular promises and specifically ruling out the money to pay for them. Why do the Liberal Democrats need a policy review?

The document begins with a foreword (how novel!) which says how bad the other parties are, how good we are and we must take on the Reform Party. It calls for "*big bold policies*". It comes nearest to a unifying principle in a statement I like, "Putting real power in people's hands and holding the already powerful to account".

This is a long section divided into economy, public services and global challenges. The economics section describes well the problems of low growth, static productivity and poverty with supporting statistics, but it fails to mention artificial intelligence at all.

### EUROPE DUCKED

Above all it ducks the biggest economic challenge, the cost of being outside the European Single Market and Customs Union, which has been variously estimated as an annual economic loss between £100bn to £140bn. Instead the review opts for blaming "*...the Conservatives' botched deal with Europe*".

This is the same game Starmer plays, to pretend that we can make a success of Brexit, unlike the Tories. It's nonsense. Brexit is the problem and we should be clear about that.

The conference motion endorsing the policy review is even worse; it is contradictory and lacks ambition. The motion regrets that the Labour government "*continues to refuse to entertain the prospect of membership of the Single Market or the Customs Union*". Instead of calling for the UK to start negotiations to join the Single Market, it hides shyly behind the formula that we have a "*...four-step roadmap towards membership of the Single Market*".

Not sure we're doing enough to take the first step or to indicate the desired direction to the electorate.

However, aren't we telling the public that we want to join the Customs Union? No. Funnily enough our famous four-step doesn't mention the Customs Union. Recent announcements by leadership have called for "*A bespoke UK-EU customs union by 2030*." Sounds like a new suit, not the Customs Union (Why not? Never heard an explanation) and not very soon. Nevertheless that same conference motion calls on the government to "*...immediately begin talks on agreeing a new, bespoke UK-EU Customs Union...*" We want government action now but we don't expect the desired tailoring of a bespoke customs union to be ready until 2030. I think I'd change my tailor. The review claims that this new suit "*...is the single biggest thing the Government could do to turbocharge our economy*". What about the Single Market then? Sssh! Don't mention it.

The review then briefly complains of the failure of public services. NHS and education problems are spelt out with figures followed by tut-tutting at the waste of public money by the Tories.

Only now does the danger of artificial intelligence appear and the need to regulate it. That's it. Perhaps the authors felt we had already said enough about public services elsewhere. This section concludes with two paragraphs on global challenges which barely have room to mention Putin, Trump, Africa, Asia and, yes, Ukraine and Gaza.

The section A Brighter Future claims to set out our vision. It starts with a Churchillian sentiment but lacks Churchillian rhetoric, "*Things can get better. Britain has overcome big challenges before and we can do it again now*." For further encouragement it quotes the famous words from the preamble to the constitution. Then it lists "*Our values and approach*" thus: everyone must have a chance to fulfil their potential; the state is not always right, it should empower individuals, businesses and communities; we are instinctively suspicious of concentrations of power but we want an active and effective state (some tension there I feel); we are impatient for change but don't like short-term decision-making (more tension?). The constant emphasis as each belief is mentioned is that everything we want is for everyone, not just our friends or a certain social class. Finally, "*Our goal is to transform the nature of British politics itself*" to make it responsive, long-term and evidence-based and to "*break down conventional silos*". Great agenda. What will we do after breakfast?

Armed with these values, the review moves on to our response. Hedgehogs beware (particularly those of you obsessed with transport), there is only so much policy you can pack into a policy review. There are eight subsections. Each begins with a statement of what we



believe (I have capitalised). As you read them, ask yourself if the belief is specifically Liberal or perhaps something no-one would publicly disagree with. You will find both kinds.

Each subsection refers to established policies, noting previous working groups or which conference passed them and reminding us what was in the general election manifesto.

There is so much focus on policy working groups, that this whole section reads more like a work programme for the Federal Policy Committee than a conference motion, but I mustn't be churlish. It's good that conference is asked to agree or not.

The Review mentions existing working groups: Opportunities & Skills (debate this autumn), the Economy (debate autumn 2026), Primary Healthcare (autumn 2026), Mental Health (spring 2026).

It recommends new ones: Support for Start-ups and Small Businesses, Strategic Look at Health and Care, Victims of Crime (policing and justice system), Empowering Consumers, Defending and strengthening British Democracy, Empowering Local Communities, International Security (despite a recent one in 2024 but I guess quite a lot has happened since then) and Rural Communities. It considers no new working groups required on Transport (sorry, hedgehogs), Climate Change (surely Duncan Brack hasn't already said everything)

## SUBSECTION 1: THE ECONOMY

*"WE BELIEVE that everyone deserves the chance to get on in life and see their hard work and aspiration properly rewarded."* Economic growth is not an end in itself but necessary to improve wellbeing and must be sustainable. We would back small and growing businesses. Here comes the new suit again. We would tackle the UK's skills shortages and support universities. Existing working groups are preparing plans for the economy and for town centres.

## 2: PUBLIC SERVICES.

On health *"WE BELIEVE that everyone should receive the care they need..."*. On education, *"WE BELIEVE that every child deserves the best possible start in life and the opportunity to flourish..."* To protect children, *"WE BELIEVE that the best way ... is to support families in all their shapes and sizes"*.

## 3: DEMOCRACY

We recall the public's loss of trust in politics, our struggle for fair votes and decentralisation.

## 4: RIGHTS & EQUALITY

*"WE BELIEVE that every person matters."* It recalls our support for the Human Rights Act. It commits us to more work on inequality, misogyny and violence against women and girls, the disabled and the rights of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. We would scrap the Conservatives' anti-protest laws, which Starmer has failed to do.

## 5: IMMIGRATION

*"WE BELIEVE that British employers must be able to hire the workers they need, and those who choose*

*"The conference motion endorsing the policy review is even worse; it is contradictory and lacks ambition"*

*to come to the UK to work or study should be welcomed..."* As well as other improvements to the system, we have called for a service standard of three months for most asylum claims and for claimants waiting longer to be able to work.

## 6: COMMUNITY

*"WE BELIEVE that, if someone wants to do their bit, and play their part in their community, they should have the opportunity and the power to do so"* and we demand that the state should empower everyone to contribute fully to their communities, although I'm not sure what that means. We have outlined better funding for local government and more social housing. It then recalls established policy on housing and transport.

## 7: ENVIRONMENT

*"WE BELIEVE that everyone should be able to enjoy the benefits of a flourishing natural environment, and our children should inherit the healthy planet they deserve."* As well as our general commitment to tackling climate change and protecting nature, the review recalls our policies on sewage (which includes replacing Ofwat) and farming.

## 8: GLOBAL INSTABILITY

*"WE BELIEVE that our country and our people thrive when we are open and outward-looking."* The Review asserts that events beyond Britain's borders are our concern and we must be able to communicate that to the voters. We want to rebuild ties with Europe. Here comes that new suit again. We say it's essential to strengthen UK defence.

The Review finishes with a conclusion in three paragraphs which claims we have bold, distinctive proposals and played an important role in the last parliament. It concludes we must continue to lead the way.

I hope this isn't whistling in the dark. Have we really led the way? Was anyone listening Are they now? We have 72 hard-working MPs but the media prefers to report every time Farage blows his nose.

I may be cynical but I give credit to all the people who have worked hard on this policy review, although I do doubt its usefulness. Of course it doesn't break new ground. It's not meant to. It takes stock. The hedgehogs may not like it but the foxes may also be disappointed because, for all its comprehensive merit, it does not provide that vision thing, that overwhelming unifying narrative message to the voters. Anyone want to try?

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David Grace is a member of the Liberator Collective

# HOMES BROKEN BY SOCIAL HOUSING

## Poor and overcrowded homes are damaging residents' health and life prospects, says Rachel Bentley

I wrote an article in in Liberator 425 on the moral case for fighting Labour. I argued that Labour is rightly criticised for taking certain voters for granted, assuming their support without adequately addressing their needs. I pointed to the reality that too many Londoners live in dreadful housing conditions, in communities plagued by crime and antisocial behaviour. As a party, we can't just look the other way.

A year on, while our political prospects against Labour feel more encouraging, little has changed when it comes to the housing crisis. If anything, it feels more acute and the human cost is devastating. In my borough of Southwark, crossing a street can take you from comfortable affluence to stark deprivation. It is jarring, and it cuts away at our social fabric.

### SOCIAL HARM

Liberal Democrats love to debate housing policy, most often through the lens of economics focusing on supply, tenure, and cost. These elements are, of course, critical to the solution. But I want to push the conversation beyond the market and focus squarely on the social harm being caused.

In too many cases, the fundamental dignity of our neighbours is being eroded by housing precarity and this is contributing to the epidemic of mental ill-health. I also believe it's helping to fuel the widespread disillusionment we see with conventional politics from

all sides, and with mainstream economic thinking, particularly on the Left.

Southwark Council is the UK's second-largest social landlord, with around 39% of our homes classified as social housing. Over the past year, I've noticed a troubling new theme emerge in my housing casework.

Increasingly, I'm hearing from adult children and grandchildren of social tenants who are still living 'at home'. They know they will become homeless upon the death or serious decline of their relative. These are people trying to plan their futures, knowing their homes may be taken from them just weeks after a bereavement.

In some cases, that nightmare has already arrived. I've worked on cases where eviction notices were issued after a secure tenant was moved into a nursing home or when relatives were barely in their graves. The anxiety and despair these families face is visceral. It impacts their ability to sleep, work, study and participate in society. In short, it chips away at their humanity.

What's the right answer here? Some will argue that Southwark Council must prioritise the more than 18,000 households on the housing waiting list. When a secure tenant dies or moves, their tenancy ends and the property becomes available to someone else in need. Isn't that fair? After all, we have an estimated 3,500 children living in temporary accommodation in our borough alone. This is profoundly damaging to their prospects, and to their parents' wellbeing.

But here's the problem: the adult child or grandchild of a secure tenant, once evicted, is likely to simply become another name on that same waiting list. And so the cycle of insecurity continues.

Our housing crisis is not only about bricks and mortar. It is about wellbeing, dignity, and stability. We are seeing multigenerational households stuck in cramped accommodation for far longer than was typical in the past. This is not out of choice but out of necessity. These people are not freeloaders, they are



#### Fringe Meeting:

##### Miscarriages of Justice - Why?

Saturday 20 Sept.  
20.15-21.30

An expert panel commence R-L-J/LDLA's conference fringe with "Miscarriages of Justice - Why do they keep happening and what can be done?"

Highcliff Marriott, Sandbanks Room

BOURNEMOUTH  
2025



LIBERAL DEMOCRAT  
LAWYERS ASSOCIATION

#### R-L-J/LDLA Open Afternoon at the Trouville Hotel Sunday 21st September. 1pm onwards

Join us for a relaxed afternoon of discussion of a variety of current topics—just around the corner from the conference.

Lucy Letby—Ukraine—War Crimes— Europe— Alternative economics for growth—the Right to Protest— Indeterminate sentences and joint enterprise—"The Party".

For details and timings ask at our exhibition desk or on our website at: <https://bit.ly/RLJ-Sunday-Fringe-Events>.





families. Sometimes these arrangements are based on care and mutual support. They help maintain social connections, keep people in local jobs and schools and strengthen community ties. Most simply can't afford to live elsewhere, especially not in the private rented sector.

But prolonged overcrowding puts enormous pressure on families and on neighbours. I think often of a couple who have delayed having children because they live in a black mould-infested bedsit. It's unlikely they will ever start a family. Or the grandchild who watched his grandfather die slowly from lung cancer in the living room of their home.

The law doesn't consider this situation to be statutorily overcrowded, because the living room legally counts as a bedroom. Can this really be the case in 2025, in one of the richest cities in the world?

Or the elderly man forced to leave his home of over 30 years because of constant noise from a family of four living in the one-bedroom flat above him. That situation spiralled into counter-allegations of bigotry and harassment, with repeated calls to the council and police. After years of conflict and distress, he now has just one week to move into his new home or face double rent. How many of us could reasonably be expected to move house in a week, especially after years of isolation in our advanced years?

## LIFELONG SCHISMS

And I think too about separated parents, mostly fathers, who can't have their children stay overnight because there's simply nowhere for them to sleep. This can lead to estrangement, particularly during teenage years, risking the likelihood of lifelong schisms.

It's important to add that these aren't problems exclusive to social housing. The private rented sector is rife with appalling cases of overcrowding, unsafe conditions, and landlord neglect, despite attempts to strengthen regulation. Yes, new builds are going

*"I've worked on cases where eviction notices were issued after a secure tenant was moved into a nursing home or when relatives were barely in their graves"*

up but in my ward, studio flats are being marketed for £2,800 a month. It's hard to argue this is solving the crisis, particularly when those flats are owned by an offshore private equity firm with no real social stake in the local community.

So what's the answer?

As a party, we must reframe our housing policy around people. When we talk about social housing, we must focus on how tenants are treated, not just on the affordability of rent. We must press for a change in the law that

prevents a living room being classed as a permanent bedroom. We must advocate for pre-planning in social tenancy succession, including support and meaningful incentives for downsizing, realistic timeframes to prepare for moves and policies that acknowledge the social value of strong familial and community ties.

In next year's local elections in London and other cities, we must put housing at the heart of our manifestos with a credible and compassionate policy offer, backed by our MPs and local councillors.

Because addressing our housing crisis is not just an economic challenge it is a moral one. It is undermining family life, damaging mental health and tearing our social fabric – things we care so deeply about as a party. We will never achieve meaningful, shared prosperity in the UK without addressing our housing crisis. Yes, that means building more decent and affordable homes but it also means standing up for the dignity of people already living in them.

A good home is the foundation of a good life. And right now, that foundation is cracking beneath us.

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





# PENSIONERS PAYING

## Should wealthier pensioners be asked to pay towards the NHS? William Tranby explains why

This year the Government had to backtrack on its decision to restrict the winter fuel allowance to those on benefits or pension credit. But the effective cut off was now those earning £35,000 a year. The BBC calculated that only one million pensioners would be taxed to reclaim the value of the restored universal payment, while 8.0m would benefit from the U-turn.

In 2024 the average weekly income for single pensioners in the UK was £282, or approximately £14,664 per year. This was calculated by an organisation called 'unbiased', a pension advice company.

What is surprising is how low this is, given that it takes account of the state pension and any additional income from private or company pensions.

The [gov.uk] website offered similar figures drawn from the Families Resources Survey, with average single pensioner incomes of £267 in the financial year ending 2023. This would equate to £13,884 per year.

While these are averages, and there will be more than half of pensioners earning above these indicative figures, the numbers suggest that the Government was being wildly generous in setting the trigger point of £35,000 a year before the winter fuel allowance would be clawed back through the tax system. Was this a possible miscalculation, or a knee-jerk reaction without a proper analysis of pensioner incomes?

I advocated in *Liberator* 428 the need to ask higher income pensioners to make a contribution to the spiralling cost of state pensions and the NHS.

In 2023 NHS England reported that 51% of the care budget was spent on the over-65s. The LSE published a figure in 2024 that suggested pensioners cost the NHS five times as much as workers in their health and care costs.

Workers pay national insurance as a tax on their income. Pensioners who qualify for a state pension because of their age don't. I am not suggesting that NI should be restored as a tax on pensioners. This would undermine the rationale that National Insurance contributions are a tool for determining an individual's eligibility for the state pension. Let's not mess around with that justification.

However, there is a case, it seems to me, for asking certain pensioners receiving above average incomes, for making a contribution through an NHS Tax. Given that the Government wanted to save money by looking at pensioners' eligibility for Winter Fuel Allowance and resorted to using the tax system for correcting any perceived over-payment, they should use the same method for correcting any over-generosity in the state pension in the same way.

The current triple lock is being regularly criticised because it costs the Government (and by implication working taxpayers) more and more each year. But instead of creating more intricate mechanisms for

calculating a 'fair' increase for the poorest pensioners; and then add in the complex bureaucracy of pension credit applications, it would be easier and more cost effective to maintain the present triple lock to steadily boost the value of the state pension over time, and use the tax system to clawback cash from the better off pensioners.

My suggestion is to introduce an NHS Tax of around 4% for pensioners earning more than a certain threshold. The Government has already determined one for taxing the Winter Fuel Allowance, at £35,000, which I find remarkably generous given it only taxes around 1.0m pensioners.

My original thought was to introduce the NHS Tax for those earning more than £20,000, which would still be a minority of pensioners given the numbers mentioned earlier. Better minds than mine could calculate the best trigger point for paying the new tax.

The Labour party boxed itself in when it declared it would not put up income tax, NICs or VAT rates in its 2024 manifesto. But it said nothing about any new taxes.

Liberal Democrats should be championing a simplified tax and benefits system, stressing the value of universal entitlements to eradicate poverty, but progressive taxes for the better off to pay for more generous universal benefits.

After all, a minimum income would be paid for by the same process, so let's start with the universal income we already have – the state pension – and learn the lessons from applying this approach to the state pension system.

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William Tranby is a member of the *Liberator* Collective

# FENCE SITTERS

## Abstaining in Parliament is no strategy for the Lib Dems, says Sophie Layton

Christine Jardine MP was one of my e Liberal Democrat front bench favourites. Principled, personable, a staunch ally of trans+ and women's rights, progressive liberalism and a kind, friendly soul, until she was unceremoniously removed from her position for...voting against a harmful Conservative amendment to Labour's Welfare Bill (Liberator 430)?

In the hours that followed, work and pensions spokesperson Steve Darling explained that MPs were whipped to abstain on this amendment, as voting against would imply that Liberal Democrats believe "the bill should be implemented in full without delay", and this could be used by the Conservatives against Liberal Democrat candidates in future campaigns.

Firstly, I completely disagree, that's not what voting against a wrecking amendment suggests at all. And even if it did, the Conservatives, and any party opposing us, will be able to find electoral ammunition no matter what we do.

But that's not what I want to focus on. Rather, that Liberal Democrat MPs were whipped to abstain. So what? No big deal, right?

Sadly, I'm inclined to disagree. The parliamentary party seem to increasingly be using abstention as a position in Parliament, whether for bills, amendments or anything in-between. While principled abstentions are a valuable position to take on occasion, they must be used sparingly, and here's why.

Parliamentary divisions, and increasingly all forms of political communication, rely on binary opinion – MPs vote 'aye' or 'nay', politicians agree with something someone else has done or they don't, an individual thinks they need to resign or thinks they don't. As such, on the Parliamentary website, MPs are shown to vote in favour, or against (or are absent). Simple. If MPs are whipped to abstain, there are two options – either don't vote at all, and have your MPs appear in 'no vote recorded', triggering accusations of laziness or lack of care, or vote in both lobbies, and appear on both lists simultaneously...at which point you open yourselves up to attacks from both sides.

Take the motion before recess to proscribe three groups as terrorist organisations, including Palestine Action. In this vote, MPs were whipped to abstain, due to disagreement on the proscription of Palestine Action, but agreement for the two other groups. This is all well and good on paper, but it gives the indication that many members simply just did not turn out to cast an opinion.

At a time when trust in politicians is already incredibly low, this does nothing to improve that. It also gives those on both sides the chance to attack the Liberal Democrat action – those on the Right can attack us for not voting to proscribe the Far-Right organisations; those on the Left can attack us for not voting against the proscription of Palestine Action.

And this all plays into a wider narrative – we don't have one.

So often, we ask why we get so little media coverage, why so few people recognise our politicians, our policy positions, why we remain stagnant at some 15% of the vote share even when Reform has climbed 20 points and Labour fallen by an even bigger margin.

I appreciate that the right-wing media's obsession with every word Nigel Farage utters is the primary responsibility for this, but we're doing nothing to stem this flow. We don't have anywhere near as strong a narrative as people inside the party seem to believe, and repetitive abstentions aids this trend. The clearer 'opinions' we as a party can put out there, the more of a chance we have.

The two policies that I genuinely saw generate the most attention in the past few months were showing Premier League games on Freeview TV and stopping music being played on public transport...great.

But we're not creating a story that people think we are. People don't care about what we're saying and abstaining at the rate we are will do nothing to change that. We're one year in with no significant gain in our appeal. If there was an election tomorrow, more than half of constituencies would change hands...and we'd gain a grand total of eight more. That's not amazing.

Abstentions, particularly principled ones, absolutely have their place. And as a centre to centre-left party, they are always more likely to be used by Liberal Democrats.

But if we want to seriously start making progress and chip away at Reform UK, we've got to get off the fence. Every time we abstain, people don't go searching for why, they just see that we didn't vote. That's not a story. That's not something our MPs and members can run with. If you need to explain to a lay audience why you voted a certain way, you will lose your listeners very quickly.

In the musical *Hamilton*, the titular Founding Father asks his rival, and the show's antagonist, Aaron Burr, "if you stand for nothing, what'll you fall for?"

For anyone who's seen it, or knows their history, you know what happens. If we want to be in the room people need to know what we're against and what we're for..

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

# STARMER SHOULD GET REAL ABOUT DEFENCE

In a world where Europe can no longer rely on America for defence and Russian aggression continues in Ukraine, George Cunningham says radical change is needed to thinking about UK defence

Nobody has any doubt now that the world is going through profound changes. The threat level for Europe is rising. The NATO Alliance is not as strong or credible as it was. The UK and its European allies need to rearm to better deter aggression.

At the NATO summit in The Hague this June, and after much pressure from the United States, member countries (with some pushback from Spain, Belgium and Slovakia) reluctantly agreed to increase their expenditure on defence from a target of a minimum of 2% to 5% of GDP, made up of 3.5% of GDP for core military expenditure plus 1.5% on security-related matters, like infrastructure projects and cybersecurity, by 2035 [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_236705.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_236705.htm).

Yet the clock is ticking much faster. A 10-year deadline is a sure bet that most countries will continue to kick the defence can down the road, hoping the responsibility for most of the heavy lifting will not lie within the timeframe of their current governments.

However, with Russia's war machine running at full tilt, the reality is we have more like two-to-three years to get our act together.

Putin is hardly going to hang around until we are fully rearmed in 2035 (if countries even carry through their pledges). Despite having suffered one million casualties during its latest war, the Russian army has increased its size to 1.32m active military personnel, and spends 7.05% of GDP on the military <https://www.statista.com/topics/9957/armed-forces-of-russia/#topicOverview>. A new formation of Russian troops is suspected to be in the making either for a last push in Ukraine and/or for deployment elsewhere.

We must keep Ukraine well supplied and supported, to keep it in the fight, regardless of what the US does, to protect the whole of Europe.

## RUSSIAN BLITZ

Suffering a Russian blitz on its main cities, and gradual loss of territory without much hope of regaining it, Ukraine is on the ropes. Ukraine supports a ceasefire on the current line of contact. But Putin has persuaded Trump that he should have a peace agreement and pocket more territory. The war may soon come to a pause. With such a high level of mobilisation and hard-bitten experienced soldiers available, will Russia then try for more elsewhere?

NATO sighed a breath of relief earlier this year when US air force General Alexis G. Grynke

was appointed Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR). Europe proclaimed it to be a sign of the US's continued commitment to NATO.

In reality, it is not surprising that the US continued to be in charge of NATO militarily. As in the decision to withdraw from Afghanistan, the

US commands and Europe follows. Having the US as NATO's supreme commander reinforces the inability of NATO to go to war if the US wishes to block it from doing so.

The US' commitment to NATO will undergo a further test this September, given the US concerns about China's threat to its interests in the Indo-Pacific.

The US Global Force Posture Review is expected as a minimum to reduce the 20,000 US troops sent by former President Joe Biden to Europe in 2022 because of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. That would still leave around 70-90,000 US troops in Europe, if cuts were to go no further. However, talk of a drawdown of up to 30% in Europe is possible.

And then of course it's crucial that any US drawdown is undertaken in an orderly, coordinated, measured pace (the experience of the over-hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan does not exude much confidence). Europe on its own lacks the ability to take on Russian





ground-based air defences from the air, cannot resupply ammunition speedily, does not have enough tanker aircraft, and lacks sufficient command and control and satellite capabilities. As the Royal United Services Institute recently warned: “In the event of a clash with China in the Indo-Pacific that removes the capacity for large-scale US military reinforcement and support elsewhere, Europe will be left vulnerable to concurrent military aggression by Russia.” <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/europe-must-urgently-prepare-deter-russia-without-large-scale-us-support>

*“Both Starmer and Healey are in denial of the truth, talking up the UK’s leadership in the security and defence, without the means to achieve it”*

## DOUBTFUL COMMITMENT

It used to be a given that NATO allies would band together in times of crisis. Yet the US’s current doubtful commitment may well give second thoughts to other allies. Could the UK even find itself alone?

In a recent simulation exercise, called The Wargame <https://www.globalplayer.com/podcasts/42Kt8P/> former UK ministers, military chiefs and other experts tried to defend the UK from Russian attack. It showed how unprepared the UK is - and that NATO allies might not come to its rescue. The US positioned itself as an equal-handed mediator between the UK and Russia, actually working towards dissuading the UK from responding militarily to Russian attacks, even when it struck our civilian population.

Everyone knows we collected a handsome peace dividend after the end of the Cold War. Not only have our military capabilities shrunk but in many cases the process of upgrading and procuring replacements for our equipment has been incompetently managed.

Just some examples: we have built two aircraft carriers without having enough Royal Naval vessels to protect them from attack in high intensity warfare. We cannot just rely on allies to protect them. If an aircraft carrier were to be sunk, over one thousand British lives could be lost; half of the Royal Navy’s small total of 16 destroyers and frigates are not operational; the last two Trident missile tests (in 2016 and 2024) failed. Can we even depend on our nuclear deterrent (or US technology; our virtual lack of air missile defence on the UK mainland means we cannot protect civilian lives in particular. Russia’s relentless and ruthless daily missile and drone attacks on Ukraine’s cities shows the devastation that a modern-day blitz can do; more are leaving than joining our armed forces because of dilapidated accommodation, poor morale and low pay.

Irrespective of reality, worryingly both Starmer and Healey are in denial of the truth, talking up the UK’s leadership in the security and defence, without the means to achieve it. Just some examples follow.

There is a persistent belief in the centrality of NATO and that the US can be persuaded to help Europe militarily against Russia, when all signs are to the contrary.

Before the recent NATO agreement, Labour committed itself in its UK Strategic Defence Review

to raise defence spending to only 2.5% of GDP by 2027-28 with an “ambition”, according to Starmer, “to hit 3% in the next Parliament, subject to economic and fiscal conditions.” In reality, he was – and still is - saying the heavy-lifting is for another government, “not mine”.

After the NATO summit, Starmer said the UK would spend 4.1% of GDP on defence by 2027. How was

that figure reached? By labelling any old pre-planned UK infrastructure works as military (1.5%) to bump up the figure.

## AFGHAN SYNDROME

As part of the Coalition of the Willing, the UK has committed itself to supplying “boots on the ground and planes in the air” to police a possible ceasefire in Ukraine. However, the UK’s army is too stretched to do something new in Ukraine. Only one UK brigade can be deployed anywhere at short notice with few coalition partners willing to do much more (while the Ukrainian army is holding back Russia with 110 brigades). Is Healey suffering from the Afghan syndrome, by intending to deploy “ghost soldiers”?

When visiting our aircraft carrier on exercise in the Indo-Pacific in Darwin in July, Healey said: “The security of the Indo-Pacific is indivisible from the security of the Euro-Atlantic” and that “Australia and the UK are nations that will fight together”. However, we do not have the wherewithal to continue pretending we are a global power. The priority for us with our limited resources must be the European theatre, especially if the US starts pulling out significantly from Europe.

Given budgetary restrictions until the magic formula is found to grow the UK economy again, we need to prioritise what can be done in the next two-to-three years to better deter aggression. Some thoughts:

- ☛ Speed up repairs to our laid-up Royal Navy frigates and destroyers.
- ☛ While continuing donations of munitions to the Ukrainian army, replenish our own ammunition stocks as urgently as possible.
- ☛ Set up a joint UK-Ukraine training system so that we help Ukraine train more troops while benefiting from their expertise in modern warfare
- ☛ Form a reserve battalion of newly-recruited Generation Z drone operators, while ensuring full integration of drone warfare training and defence across our armed forces.
- ☛ Appoint the long-awaited new UK national armaments director and encourage UK-European-Ukrainian industry partnership to produce drones and other cutting edge battlefield technology inexpensively in a timely way.
- ☛ Put our main British army effort into making the Joint Expeditionary Force a serious deterrent to Russian aggression in the Baltic states. Do

not deplete UK military resources from there to Ukraine.

- ☛ Ensure the production of Typhoon Eurofighters is not closed down in the UK by giving more orders to continue bolstering the size of the Royal Air Force rather than relying on more US built F-35s.
- ☛ Starting weaning the UK off its reliance on US military equipment.
- ☛ And not forgetting the importance of robust diplomacy to try to avoid war, in close coordination with our European partners.

And in the medium term, in addition to the recommendations of the UK's Strategic Defence Review [https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-strategic-defence-review-2025-making-britain-safer-secure-at-home-strong-abroad?dm\\_i=1W52,8Y96P,A3XLHH,11CSJR,1](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-strategic-defence-review-2025-making-britain-safer-secure-at-home-strong-abroad?dm_i=1W52,8Y96P,A3XLHH,11CSJR,1) we should consider repositioning a British armoured brigade in Poland, working with Polish/Coalition of the Willing troops, to establish how best to fight modern warfare, with a strong training input from Ukraine.

We should also encourage Ukrainian military participation in future Coalitions of the Willing, outside countries bordering Russia and hold individuals and companies to account if they are responsible for negligence in the performance of defence contracts.

The entry level costs of an iron dome-like air defence system covering the whole of the UK has been estimated at around £25bn. The country should be made aware of this and the government should hold a debate with civil society about what should be done.

We need a strong relationship with the US but on a different basis. Not today's subordinate client basis, but a basis of mutual respect built on our regaining UK/Europe's former strength and ability to act independently in its own defence.

NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte told the European Parliament bluntly in January: "Spending more on defence means spending less on other priorities."

The inexorable growth of sovereign debt is straining all western economies. In the UK, 50 years ago, approximately one-third of government spending was on health, education and welfare. Today that figure is 75%.

The idea of establishing a Rearmament Bank is being



floated to raise additional private capital for defence. The UK is also aiming to pay in to join the EU's new Security Action for Europe (SAFE), fund which will offer €150bn in low-interest loans to support joint procurement efforts.

However, the responsible way would be to combine this with finding ways to raise more income or reduce government expenditure, investing more in defence.

We need to assist the Labour government both in growing the economy (and join the EU's Customs Union) as well as not automatically opposing all their attempts at raising more income or cost-cutting.

Ed Davey (pictured with Helen Maguire MP at a NATO base in Estonia) has been right to call on the prime minister to hold talks to establish a consensus across the political divide on how to further increase defence spending.

The gravity of the situation requires the prime minister to address the nation to lay out the challenges and consequences.

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George Cunningham is an elected member of the Federal International Relations Committee and on the executive of Lib Dems Friends of the Armed Forces and Lib Dems Overseas

**Note: 20 September 20:15 at  
Bournemouth Centre, Branksoem Suite.  
Lib Dem Friends of Armed Forces and Lib  
Dem Friends of Ukraine  
Modern Warfare: lessons from  
Ukraine's war against  
Russia's aggression**

**Speaker: General Valerii Zaluzhnyi,  
Commander-in-Chief of Ukraine's  
armed forces 2021-2024, now  
Ukraine's Ambassador to the UK.**

**With Lib Dem Defence spokesperson  
Helen Maguire MP**





# PRESIDENTIAL PITCHES

## Three candidates are vying for the somewhat “it’s what you make of it” post of Liberal Democrat president

The president has to chair the Federal Board, sits on other federal committees and “shall be the principal public representative of the party”, which is a rather open-ended job description.

Past presidents have done the job very differently and with Mark Pack having completed his permitted two terms the race is on for a successor.

Liberator put seven questions to the three known contenders, Josh Babarinde, Natalie Bird and Prue Bray, plus one individual question each and asked for a brief biography. Each was given 1500 words split between answers as they chose. These have not been edited. This is who the contenders are and what they said.

### **JOSH BABARINDE**

Joining the party at 16 years old, I’ve been a proud Liberal Democrat most my life. I don’t come from a political family - but a tough childhood shaped my liberalism and relentless determination to empower others.

I spent my career building an award-winning organisation supporting young ex-offenders out of crime. At the heart of this was engaging with people who were failed and disaffected, and finding new approaches to help them thrive.

The same principles apply to our communities, who have too often been let down by politicians.

That’s why I stepped up to serve my hometown of Eastbourne as a Lib Dem councillor, where I led the campaign to declare the UK’s first cost of living emergency locally (our food bank was officially the country’s busiest).

I’m proud to have gone on to lead our local party to victory in the 2024 general election, winning against the Conservatives.



### **NATALIE BIRD**

Natalie wore a tee shirt stating the words ‘woman: adult human female’ to an internal party meeting in December 2018.

Following this Natalie had all party approvals stripped, and was given an excessive punishment of not being able to hold any internal or external role within the party for a period of 10 years. After a long running legal case, all parts of Natalie’s sex discrimination claim as well as full liability on all parts of the claim was admitted by the party.

Natalie is now once again a member of Social Liberal Forum council and is running to be party president as there have been no changes to the culture of the party following her win.

### **PRUE BRAY**

I have been a unitary authority councillor in Wokingham borough since 2000, and am currently lead member for children’s services and deputy leader of the



council.

I have held a number of party offices, including chair of the Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors, and successfully chaired the English Candidates Committee through two general elections.

I am currently vice chair of Federal Council and chair of the Disciplinary Sub-Group, in which role I am responsible for oversight of the party’s complaints process, but not for dealing with individual complaints.

I have been involved in a number of policy working groups, and have spoken many times at Federal Conference. My media experience includes local radio, national radio, and regional television.

In 2021, I was awarded the Leader’s Award by Ed Davey and in 2023, I received an MBE for political service. I have been married to John for 37 years and we have three grown-up children.





## **Q QUESTION 1 How would you do the job differently from Mark Pack?**

**A JB:** *I'm my own man, so I'll describe how I'd do the job of party president and will leave members to crack on making comparisons!*

Fundamentally, I want to ensure that our party has the energy, focus, and ambition to fight for the soul of our country.

Reform are surging on the basis of exploiting people's fears and offering snake oil solutions for their own political gain.

Whilst the Conservatives have become little more than a pound-shop Farage tribute act, they are still a formidable opponent of ours.

And Labour are increasingly dancing to this dark tune; Starmer's "island of strangers" speech was the tip of the iceberg.

Our communities need us to be the first and last line of defence against this populism - not to mention the nationalism we must continue to battle in Scotland and Wales.

First, to help achieve this, I'll work to ensure members, activists and campaigners have the tools they need to challenge populism and nationalism in their patches. That includes turbocharging the way we use tech to campaign on the ground.

Second, I'll lead the development of a federal youth engagement strategy, working with the Young Liberals. 16- and 17-year-olds are gaining the right to vote in Westminster elections for the first time. We must connect, inspire and win the support of these young voters.

Third, I'll drive the diversification of our party. We need to look more like, sound more like and relate more to the communities we're ambitious to represent. I'll work with the likes of the Campaign for Gender Balance, Lib Dem Women, Young Liberals, LGBT+ Lib Dems, Racial Diversity Campaign and LD Campaign for Race Equality to help get us there.

Fourth, I'll ensure our party champions our local government successes even more and will work with the Local Government Association Lib Dems to better connect our councillor insights into party HQ.

Fifth, I'll be a megaphone for members internally and externally, and will use my platforms in Parliament and with media contacts to be a vocal liberal lion for our party.

**A NB:** *My understanding is that Mark was a campaigner and author before being party president, other party presidents also seem to have had these skillsets.*

Whilst being a campaigner is useful, it has also meant there are weaknesses within the internal workings of the party and that we have had no wider vision or distinctive, cohesive message.

A political party must be a force for good and we must aim to inspire and improve the lives of everyone in the country.

We must embody Liberalism not just in our policies but in our actions.

My background is very different to Mark's as before the trauma of the last few years, I've spent my life in financial services, particularly on the legal and

compliance side. This has been around focusing on and monitoring various things around how a business is working effectively, as well as information that is reported to the board, along with ensuring there are effective processes and procedures in place.

From my side I would want to address the governance weaknesses within the internal party structures

I find it amazing that the party president, along with others, doesn't have a role remit.

I'd want that addressed initially and for our internal structures to work and finding from previous reviews to be implemented fully, we also need to build a team around what our red lines are, it is likely that an outcome of the next election will be that we may have to negotiate with other parties we aren't in agreement with.

We need to prepare and plan for this now rather than rushing at the outcome of the next election.

I'm also interested in increasing the communication and processes between local parties and HQ as this seems disconnected.

Outside of this, externally we need a distinctive image and message publicly.

If we don't want Reform to win we need to do things differently and stop being so insular.

**A PB:** *Everyone has different strengths and brings different experience to the job of president. I think the thing I have learned from the varied roles I have held across the party is that building good relationships is more important than almost anything else if we want to be effective and successful. I am lucky enough to have worked with a wide spectrum of capable people across the party and think I am in a good position to bring those people together collaboratively.*

## **Q QUESTION 2 The party has an opportunity to grow but is held back by a lack of membership growth. Is there a lack of vision and motivational drive or some other cause?**

**A JB:** *My determination for the Liberal Democrats to be the first and last line of defence against populism and nationalism in this political environment - at this critical point in our history - is hugely ambitious, and an ambition we must not shy away from.*

Members are already joining on the basis of it, donors are already giving on the basis of it, voters are supporting us on the basis of it. I believe that doubling down on this mission is a key means to drive our party's growth.

And we will do so armed with our strong liberal values and policies that resonate: from tackling the cost of living, to fighting climate change, to standing up for internationalism. As president, I'd hold all corners of our party to account on this.

Retaining and growing party membership is only part of it though. I also want to make diversifying our party a key priority. I was vice-chair of the Racial Diversity Campaign, and will work across the party to deliver a strategy to drive greater diversity at all levels, as per

the general election 2024 review.

**A NB:** *The public are largely disengaged with politics and we haven't been exciting or distinctive enough in recent years for membership to grow.*

Members need to feel excited and that they can make real changes, if we want the membership to grow we must be more accessible to ordinary individuals and our local parties must be more diverse and reflective of the country we live in.

Our grassroots membership do not have adequate chance to be heard and this must urgently change.

As a party we have had not had a cohesive vision of what we want the UK to be. We must have this in place, and not just for the next five years. I want to enable to voices of grassroots members to be heard.

**A PB:** *I think there are multiple causes. Some are related to how we live life today, which are not really in our control. But we can do something about the ones which are in our control.*

One is capacity in the membership team to follow up on lapsing members, leads and similar. We may not be able to afford a lot more paid resource to boost that team, but there is no reason why we can't enlist volunteers to increase that capacity in a more organised way than we do now.

The second is that we have defaulted to relying heavily on people finding the website and joining, and don't provide enough encouragement to local parties to go out and recruit. Some local parties are self-motivating, but some need help to realise that they can make a difference even by a small amount of activity. They may need some assistance, not just to tell them how to do it, but to put this activity on their radar at all.

I wrote a guide to recruitment which the English state party updated fairly recently, and I believe is still available. All our experience tells us that people respond best to personal contact, so it is really important we do it. One of my aims is that we set up what I am calling "knowledge hubs" – clusters of volunteers across England, Scotland and Wales, who people know they can approach when they don't know how to do something or don't know where to find information.

### **Q QUESTION 3 How would you tackle the vast north-south divide in the party both in terms of membership and electoral support?**

**A JB:** *Has chosen to answer this jointly with Question 4, see below.*

**A NB:** *As a northerner we have a deep north/south divide in our country. That divide is also apparent in our party and our internal committees, that must change.*

Our party must reflect the country, we must listen to and address the concerns of the voters.

It's vital our local parties reflect the true diversity of the country and that we are making politics accessible to the ordinary person. This will mean changing the way we do things, changing the times of meeting and having accessibility via Zoom.

Political parties are there to do good and we must ensure that the whole country can thrive. At the minute to many people are struggling just to survive.

**A PB:** *If you look at where our membership and support are, it is disproportionately in areas of low deprivation, associated with high levels of educational qualifications. We don't do enough to appeal to people beyond that very middle-class core base.*

To tackle this, we don't need to change our policies, we need to change the way we present ourselves, to balance intellectual and emotional appeal better, and to demonstrate that we are grounded in our communities. The evidence from the 2025 local elections and from by-elections is that where we get this right, we win.

It is very noticeable that Reform are doing well in areas where we are weak. People feel let down by Labour and the Conservatives and are looking for an alternative, not necessarily embracing Reform's politics. There are plenty of people in those areas who share our values and would vote for us if only we could catch their attention. There's no easy way to do that. The only way is to get out there and campaign, one ward at a time. If necessary, one street at a time.

### **Q QUESTION 4 What more can the party do to support local parties campaigning in Labour facing seats as opposed to Blue/Yellow seats?**

**A JB:** *I've been touring the country over the summer meeting members from a range of local parties to hear directly from members about how to address the exact question how to recruit more members and voters in all parts of Britain: from Trafford to Northamptonshire; from Edinburgh to Bath; from Cardiff to Clacton and more.*

Firstly, we need to ensure that campaigners in Labour-facing seats know about the resources they can access from our Labour Unit. Members in Trafford told me this support was extremely helpful - but campaigners in other Labour-facing seats hadn't come across it, so we need to address this awareness gap. Having stood in a safe labour seat in the 2019 general election, I know how lonely it can feel!

Secondly, we need to learn from the huge ground we've gained in the northern likes of Hazel Grove, Cheadle, Harrogate and Knaresborough, Westmorland and Lonsdale, Hull, Sheffield, Liverpool, Sunderland, Durham and more to ensure that a rising tide of liberalism that we drive lifts all ships - not just those in the South of England.

And thirdly, the fight against populism - particularly that posed by Reform - is a fight that swathes of Liberal Democrat campaigners are facing, regardless of the corner of the country they are in. We need to

ensure that we are 'Reform-ready' with a toolkit that equips us all with the tools we need to face down populist poison. This is a priority for me as President - and a particularly personal one, too.

I keep coming back to something a member in the Midlands told me, which really struck me: "Josh, I just want the national party to know we exist." We've got to honour this ask as part of our pitch to be a party for the whole country.

**A NB:** *We must support individuals, the starting point must be to support and grow local parties. Here we will need target seats to 'give back' and actively help the growth of development parties in the area.*

Then we must develop a national strategy and messaging. We must challenge from both the left and right. The Labour facing seats will be key in the next election for ourselves and for Reform.

We must develop emotional messaging that speaks to voters in all areas and not dismiss voters' valid concerns nor patronise voters. We must provide hope and real solutions to the problems within the UK today.

The historic connections between classes and parties have gone. People vote for whoever they think will improve their lives, their families' lives and have a persuasive programme for running the country. This means that every constituency is in the mix. The opportunities are greater than ever, but so are the challenges. There are no safe seats but first past the post means that it may be hard to know which party might sneak through in a close multiparty race. We will not cut through unless people are clear about our aims and how we can make a difference for them and their community.

We need to work on ensuring councillors are in place so it's vital we start to work on assisting local parties in these areas as soon as possible.

**A PB:** *I think this may be the wrong question, because if we assume there are only Red/Yellow and Blue/Yellow battles, we risk fighting the next election using the tactics and weapons of the last one.*

The political landscape has changed. We should be working out first who our principal opponent is in each area. In traditional Labour areas this may now be Reform, and we may need to campaign as the only party who can beat Reform, squeezing Labour in the process. We need more training on how to beat Reform and we need to make sure people understand their rise is an opportunity for us as well as a threat.

I would add that we have not done well enough in the past at recognising the need to adjust our campaigning to fight other opponents. The Scottish Nationalists, Plaid Cymru and the Green Party come to mind.

**Q QUESTION 5** **On several recent occasions the party has sat on the fence in the face of provocations on issues such as immigration. At what point would you speak up for Liberal principles when the**

**party leadership is silent?**

**A JB:** *When we see populists peddling division and scapegoating, I will speak out as president.*

I've got a track record of this. In response to those who have sought to sow division and spread hate in our communities in the name of our England flag of late, I stood up in Parliament and called them out. They are not patriots. The consequence was that my Eastbourne office was attacked by a thug who hurled racist and anti-immigrant abuse at my team and urinated and spat on my office door.

This was deplorable behaviour but it will not stop me from speaking out and championing our liberal values.

**A NB:** *Sitting on the fence is no longer an option. If we don't make our views clear, boldly and unapologetically then we will lose everyone. We need to persuade people of our values and approach and not worry about those who are unpersuadable. The bland middle will disappear.*

We must be bolder, and unapologetic for speaking up about things we believe in.

Where we have disagreements, we must disagree well and the argument must be dismantled. We must never attack the person who holds different opinions to us.

**A PB:** *The president should not usurp the role of the leader. So if I did have misgivings, and especially if I thought there were significant misgivings amongst members, I would raise things in private, not in public, certainly initially.*

"In private" covers internal party meetings, not just conversations with the leadership. Having said that, if the "leadership" suddenly announced that as a party we were going to support the deportation of women and children to Afghanistan, to give a topical example, I would definitely say loudly that I disagreed – and I think most people in the party would be doing the same!

To be completely serious for a moment, the point at which I would speak out on an issue would be the point at which I judged – having consulted as far as possible – that it would be less damaging to the long-term interests of the party if I spoke out than if I didn't.

**Q QUESTION 6** **Party leaders sooner or later retreat into a bunker listening only to their chosen circle and so shutting down debate. How would you deal with this?**

**A JB:** *Our party is nothing without our members and members' spectrum of views and ideas. As far as I'm concerned, a key responsibility of any party president is: 1) to listen (that's why I've been on my Listening Tour meeting members across the country); and 2) to ensure that the leader hears those views loud and clear. That's exactly what I'd do as president.*



Will there be disagreements as part of this process? You betcha! But what I love about our party is that we can – and do – have debates, disagreements and discussions, including in public at our conference. No leader should be given a free pass or special treatment and if there is one thing members are not guilty of it is blind deference to our leaders!

NB: I disagree I do not think that all party leaders retreat to a bunker listening to only their chosen circle.

I personally think this is a leadership failure. We must listen to our most vocal critics and address the points they make. We must also scrutinise ourselves, this will make us more effective in the long term.

PB: I would deal with it by building the relationship from the start with them and the people they work with closely into one of trust as far as possible, in expectation that this might arise at some point. That would give me the best chance of being listened to. And I would check with my own networks to a) make sure it wasn't me who was out of step and b) that I myself hadn't turned into one of the chosen circle who wasn't listening.

**Q QUESTION 7 What matters more - increasing the proportion of the UK electorate who understand what Liberal values are, or electing more Liberal Democrats to public office.**

**A JB:** *I don't think the two are contradictory – but what I would say is that for me, as a political party we need to be the point where values, philosophy and principles, and electoral reality intersect. I want to get more Liberal Democrats elected: that's how we improve our communities. Building our party to be the first and last line of defence against populism; telling more people about what we are doing in the councils we are running; showing them how we are holding Labour and the SNP to account in governments are all part of both showing our values AND electing more colleagues at every level of government.*

**A NB:** *How can we get more liberal democrats into elected office if the public don't understand what liberalism is or why it's important?*

**A PB:** *It's not an either/or question. One reinforces the other, so you have to do both. I would definitely not want either one to dominate. Too much focus on increasing the spread of liberalism risks creating another 1983 election – a high vote share but spread too evenly to win many seats. Too much focus on getting over the line in a smaller number of seats risks losing our deposit in many of the others, damaging our credibility and prospects as a national party. The aim should be to hit the sweet spot in the balance between the two.*

## INDIVIDUAL QUESTIONS

**Q JB: You are a first time MP with a seat to defend, how will you fit being president around that?**

**A** *I've never been the kind of person who likes to do things in half measures, so before deciding to stand for party president, I thought very seriously about how I would pull out all the stops to commit to the role.*

Firstly, I would stand down from my front bench role as our justice spokesperson and from Parliament's Justice Select Committee. I'm so proud to champion our party using these platforms but I'd want to focus on being the best party president I can.

Secondly, I'm a team player, so I'd keep building barnstorming teams to support my work and expand capacity. In Eastbourne, I've spent years building an election-winning team, who have supported me while juggling my front bench responsibilities in Parliament - and we're achieving fantastic results, including two successful council by-election defences this year with 50% of the vote each! I'd keep investing in my fantastic team. And as president, I'd deploy the same fundraising skills I used to raise record amounts in Eastbourne to fundraise for further presidential staff resource to assist with delivering the projects I've set out above.

What's more is that there's a track record of party presidents having other responsibilities outside the role too (every president has either been a parliamentarian or become a parliamentarian, for example - including Tim Farron, Charles Kennedy and Simon Hughes). This is because the presidency is a voluntary role and many people wouldn't have the means to do it full-time without having a paid job, too.

I'd be concerned if we ever got to a place where we expected our volunteer president to have no other job. That expectation would run counter to the inclusivity and diversity that I believe the values of our party should demand. I know a number of party members have got some ideas about how the presidency could become more inclusive for the future, and I'd definitely be up for this discussion. The same goes for candidates for local and parliamentary elections too. We need to make it possible for anyone to stand and champion liberal values, regardless of their background.

**Q NB: How as president could you work with party staff and officers who acted on the opposite side in your recent legal case against the party?**

**A** *Party staff were told what to do and what choices to make, they were not responsible for the decision making around my case or the excessive punishments given.*

Elected party officers are somewhat different as some of these individuals chose to punish and make an example of me for wearing a t-shirt to an internal party meeting. There are some elected party officers that need to look to their conscience and resign from

their positions.

More widely we need to embody professionalism and unity as a party which means working to positive ends with individuals who disagree with us.

**Q PB: President is an unpaid post making heavy demands on the incumbent's time and resources. How will you deal with this?**

**A** *I am fortunate that our household income is sufficient that the fact that the post is unpaid will not prevent me being able to take it up. I am aware that for a lot of people in the party this would not be the case, and one of the things I would like to do would be to look at how we make it possible for people to do this kind of role if they don't have the financial resources to be able to afford to do it unpaid.*

In terms of time, if I became president I would give up a number of things I currently do, such as: ALDC management committee, Federal Council, English Council Executive, and the Disciplinary Sub-Group, which I chair. I probably wouldn't be able to continue delivering as much training and mentoring as I do now. I don't think I would need to give up being a councillor - that is an important role, but it's not a full-time job.

**Do you remember the original**

## **Radical Bulletin?**

***In 1970 a group of Young Liberals began Radical Bulletin, a monthly publication which aimed to "fill the vacuum" of radicalism in the Liberal Party after the Parliamentary grouping was halved at that year's General Election. It ran for over a decade before being absorbed by Liberator around 1983.***

***If you have any memories or anecdotes, or are in possession of any materials or sources - however hazy or small - that could be used to help document a history of Radical Bulletin, please get in touch with Tim Macy at RadicalBulletinHistory@outlook.com***

***We look forward to hearing from you and any help in preserving its history will be gratefully received.***

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# THE MYTH OF MANAGERIALISM

Julian Ingram argues that the answer to increasingly transactional voters lies in the Liberal Democrat preamble, not just the latest slogan

Writing in *Liberator* 430 on transactional voters I made the case that one of the reasons for increased volatility was voters looking for a better transaction that met their needs and reflected their service expectations. Which has, pretty uniformly, failed to be met by any political party.

Since then YouGov has conducted polling that reveals both the extent of the move to transactional voting and the collapse of historic class and family influence on voting.

Do take a look, but here is an extract from just one chart. YouGov offered a list of 10 reasons people might have for supporting their current party. It then asked which were the two or three main reasons and, of those, which was the single most important. Here are the top results. (*Source: YouGov*)

Reasons to support a party	Top 2/3	Most important
It isn't great but <u>its</u> better than the alternatives	41	23
It shares my values	41	20
It has the best policy on the issue I feel most strongly about	39	21
It stands up for people like me	26	8

## SHOPPING AROUND

Transactional voting rather than embedded loyalty wins out. Its short-term decisions and that drives the volatility. As Peter Kellner says: "People are shopping around as never before" In this market we need to operate like a brand that stands for something relevant to enough voters. Based on a distinct set of values and a headline policy that stands out - remember '1p on tax for education'?

I want to suggest here a better way to engage with these voters and manage their service expectations. There is a simple truth in service-based businesses that it's better to offer a level of service that you can always meet and even occasionally exceed than promise a service level you often fail. I believe that one of the underlying reasons for voters becoming transactional is that they have been asked by the political system to buy service levels that fail, every time, for every policy. Why?

In the 1980s under the Thatcher revolution we underwent a sweeping wave of privatisation. Because

we were told that the market and the business's that operate in it would perform better and offer a better service, often with a superficial dash of the illusion of 'choice.'

Given the state of British business at this time this was a bit of, well a lot of, a stretch. But, after the failures of the previous Labour administration it seemed like the only option to a lot of voters.

Labour surprise failure to win the 1992 election, despite Tory corruption, division over Europe and a poor economy led to the emergence of New Labour, a more business friendly, Tory-lite approach led by Tony Blair.

A key part of their pitch was all about managerialism not Ideology. Blair promised to manage things better, not change them. After all their theme tune was

'things can only get better.' They didn't roll back privatisation, rather they scrapped clause four. They didn't believe the state could or should regain control of many areas. Rather, it was more about doing things better. To be fair in some areas they made real progress - education and health in particular.

So a myth of better managerialism became a replacement for ideology, or what I would rather call a set of brand values and beliefs expressed as solutions to problems people face.

But if you ask to be judged on managing better, and you fail to do just that, what do you fall back on? Fear of what the others might do. It's hardly providing voters with a real choice, is it, no wonder they started to shop around more.

Coming back to the present and the volatile transactional world we compete in; I would argue that standing for something that's clear and simple to understand helps to set us apart.

Yes, some people won't like it, but others will. In that volatile environment, where a seat can be won

on under 33% of the vote, it's clearly better to have a core vote to work out from than a blank canvass to throw our latest slogans and risk averse policies at.

Which brings us to the thorny issue of trust in a political party; it's never been high has it? But in today's always-on world with thousands of sources of news, rarely impartial, it's more difficult for politicians to hide their failures. Or just explain why they have.

Even if people are seeing some good service delivery to themselves, they also and hear about problems elsewhere. I am struck by people who will say their own experience of the NHS is fine but say the service is failing overall because of what they hear happening to others.

And we can't talk about trust without talking about honesty. We constantly call for vast public spending increases while opposing tax rises. I think there is a pervasive cynicism in both our own party and others that we know stuff we talk about is unworkable.

Given at the next election we may be in power again, and the damage the tuition fees did to us last time, isn't it time to be less opportunistic and more realistic about what medicine the country needs? If people better understood what we stood for then it's easier to explain why we want to spend more on X and less on Y.

## SHORT CUT

Which brings us to a brilliant short cut. The preamble to our constitution, with a little modernising of the words, provides us with just that. A clear and simple set of beliefs that guides our policy. A few years ago we ran a few workshops in Chesham and Amersham about what is a Liberal and why it matters. We brought together supporters and members. All of them thought the preamble was a great summation of what is a Liberal. Yet almost all of them also didn't realise it was the preamble to our constitution.

Brands are a shorthand for reputations based on consistent quality, value and delivery. So, when we campaign in a transactional environment with high voter volatility/churn, we don't want to have to re-win our vote every time. We don't want to have to re-squeeze tactical voters every time. We want to build up an understanding, deep down, of what we are and why we are fighting for them. That requires brand recognition, not just a colour and logo but what that colour and logo is a shorthand for.

We also ran several Focus leaflets and 'knock and drop' surveys in Beaconsfield between 2019 and 2024 that openly stated what we stood for and used a simple questionnaire to see if you were a Liberal Democrat. This is a seat we stood aside in 2019 for Dominic Grieve AND got just 8% in 2017. In 2023 we won our first local by-elections in a decade. Last year we won 27%. This May we won our first two unitary seats. Did this strategy contribute?

*"In a volatile time with many more voters unsure of who to vote for, the party with the clearest set of beliefs, clearly linked to policies will gain a disproportionate share of their vote"*

My thesis is simple. In a volatile time with many more voters unsure of who to vote for, the party with the clearest set of beliefs, clearly linked to policies that demonstrate that belief, in areas that matter to them, will gain a disproportionate share of their vote.

Like my previous article, this has implications for the way we campaign and recruit to improve our resilience. One historic example of this, pre-Connect days, was the idea to ask while canvassing

which of several issues was most important. Then to send that voter a hand delivered letter in 24 hours, setting out our policy and linking that to what we stood for.

We can now do this in our Mini-van scripts and, using email capture, to generate a near instant response. Potentially a better route than capturing an increasingly shaky historic voting intention?

Again the role of councils we control becomes the showcase of putting our beliefs into practice by meeting residents' needs and aspirations. Think about social media and doing something more than just attacking others' failure, offering a different solution.

We should never be afraid of what we stand for, and what it might cost. It's why we are in politics. We are not here to manage better; we are here to deliver change. Voters deserve to know this. Many will reward us for doing it and resisting the urge to stand behind meaningless soundbites. But perhaps the stunts are still okay.

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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

# WHEN ENGLAND SAYS F OFF

## The 'F10' attempt to streamline the Lib Dem candidates process was misunderstood and should be resolved and implemented, says Chris White

So what do members expect from a political party? All sorts of things – but fielding candidates in elections is surely one of them as is having a say in who those candidates are.

They also probably want candidates screened to weed out the unsuitable. And selected in good time to have a chance of winning.

They won't be interested in the minutiae of how that is done and will tend to assume that those doing it are essentially on the same page. They won't have heard of F10 (or any other F for that matter) and will be surprised to find that there is an English Party different from the Federal Party. In Scotland and Wales they may have a different take, of course.

### STRANGE PLACE

We are in a strange place. Essentially federal conference – the one that comprises members from England, Scotland and Wales – has voted for change. Mathematically, the 80-20 majority means that the majority of English members voted were in favour. For those who felt that they could not afford to go to conference, there was the option to participate on-line for a small fee. So the democratic mandate is clear.

For the changes to be fully implemented, the three 'state parties' have all to agree them. Wales has already agreed to changes. Scotland will consider the changes at its autumn conference.

A majority of English Council has also agreed. English Council is the equivalent of the Welsh and Scottish conferences, but comprises not members themselves but, in addition to the English regional chairs, representatives chosen in elections which take place annually in each region: many are uncontested and so elections sometimes don't take place. So the fact that the necessary two-thirds majority was not given is a problem in simple democratic terms.

So where are we now? First, Westminster candidates will still be selected: where the state has not ratified federal conference resolution F10 they will be approved and selected under the state's existing rules. Where F10 has been ratified the Joint Candidates Sub-Committee (JCSC) rules will be used. Either way there is no need for delay.

Second, mayoral approvals and selections remain with the English Party unchanged. They were never in play. Some, like me, would prefer those to transfer to regions but they remain, with practical exceptions, at the English tier. So no need for delay here either, which is just as well given how many of these are appearing as a result of the current Government's so-called devolution agenda.

And if the amendments are agreed by all state parties? Rather than decisions on rules and procedures being agreed by three different state candidate

committees for the same Westminster election, future decisions would be taken by one federal committee that includes all three state candidates chairs, with all three having an equal say on the decision.

Naturally in England the state candidates chair would be expected to seek the views of the various regional candidates chairs about any proposed changes. And JCSC as a whole would be answerable to the members at federal conference.

Moreover, regional candidates chairs would continue with their key role as well as being plugged into the new national system.

If candidate approvals and selections fall to the federal party in the way described, then the federal party will put up the funds and human resources to make the system work faster, more efficiently and in a fashion – bluntly – which makes it more likely that candidates are in place earlier and thus more likely to win.

This affects not only current good prospects (target and moving forward seats) but also smaller parties, which will best grow if candidates are in place two to three years early, rather than arriving, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, just a few weeks before the dissolution of parliament without any local member scrutiny or familiarisation.

The particular areas where the extra resources could usefully make a difference include: administrative help, co-ordination of enhanced due diligence, assistance with training events, support and mentoring programmes, help with organising assessment days. Not least there would be assistance with improving diversity.

As ever, the system has relied hugely on volunteers. This must continue. But volunteers work best when they are in turn supported by paid staff.

But wasn't this all out of the blue and a little unnecessary? No.

The issue of candidates for Westminster elections has been bubbling for over 10 years. I remember anxious challenges to English party representatives in most Federal Executive meetings in the run up to the 2015 general election. The review of that election highlighted a number of complaints and made 11 recommendations for change.

The 2019 general election review highlighted the general need to ensure that structures and processes were aligned with strategic objectives.

In 2022, Federal Communications and Elections Committee (FCEC) commissioned a report from Alison Suttie and Tim Farron. A number of significant players participated in the consultation, including those prominent in the English party structures.

The following was reported to Federal Board by FCEC: "Currently there is no strategic plan for



candidate selection as a whole during a Parliament. Candidates are a state matter, but planning for Westminster general elections is a federal matter. Our strategy needs to involve greater cooperation between the state candidates committees and the federal election planning processes."

*"The key to contentious issues is talking, preferably in three dimensions rather than Zooming in two"*

The leading recommendation was: "Ahead of the next general election the chairs of the state candidates committees, working together as the Joint Candidates Sub-Committee and working closely with the relevant HQ staff from the candidates and campaigns departments, should develop a strategic plan for candidate selection. This plan should be ready to go immediately after the next Westminster general election and should be implemented in the twelve months following the next election."

For constitutional reasons which too often dog the party many of the proposals for change were unimplemented.

## NEEDLESSLY OFFENDED

But weren't people who have given their all to ensuring that we had a good result in 2024 needlessly offended by the general election review?

It is worth restating in full a key paragraph of that review: "Perhaps more problematic, however, is the candidate selection process for Westminster elections which despite having been raised in a number of party reviews remains broken. Our volunteers are left struggling on, pouring more time and energy than many of us could or would, to ensure that come a general election the party has candidates to stand. It is to their credit that the Liberal Democrats fielded 630 candidates – 19 more than in 2019. We do them a disservice by not addressing the fragmented nature of our structures which results in an unhelpful separation between candidates and campaigns and bizarrely elections more broadly. It is only thanks to the dedication of an overworked volunteer team and frankly a miracle that this process has not tripped the party up. We should not deceive ourselves about the consequences of not fixing this."

I struggle to see here anything but praise for those that worked the unnecessarily complicated system.

But weren't returning officers criticised? Aren't some of them resigning in disgust? The report goes on: "For would-be candidates and local parties the frustration is clear. Would-be candidates are often left in the dark about when selections are taking place. This uncertainty means the party is undoubtedly missing out on talent. Evidence also suggests uncertainty can affect diversity – robbing would-be candidates of the time and space needed to give thought to what running for candidacy means. Local parties too have expressed frustration with the process, for example being caught between central functions encouraging them to start selections and then being told there is no returning officer to enable this to happen at the state level.

"Clearly, work needs to happen to ensure there are enough returning officers available to enable

selection to happen but the panel believes that this is intrinsically linked to the lack of a clear timetable for selections and a connecting thread between candidates and campaigns."

This is a comment about the failings of the system, in particular there being two masters: candidate approval and selection (English party)

and campaigning (federal party).

Could it have been handled better? Self-evidently. The key to contentious issues is talking, preferably in three dimensions rather than Zooming in two. Regional chairs need to take a clearer leading role in managing the English Party. They need to talk informally more often to the key players in the federal party and in the English Party.

The party needs to resolve this. The constitutional issues are and should be depressing. The key objective is results: a workable system that delivers candidates on time and in the right place.

Hardly rocket science or even a big ask.

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

# WHERE THE PARTY CAME FROM

## Jonathan Calder looks at a new book on liberalism that challenges assumptions about the roles of noted thinkers

In this short book, written as part of a series that promises “incisive and provocative introductions to topics, ideas and events for students wanting to know more about how we got where we are today”, Jonathan Parry provides a history of the Liberal Party and the Liberal Democrats and makes you think again about the relation between political philosophy and political practice.

The first three chapters deal with the years 1830 to 1914 – the Liberal Party’s era as a party of government – and do so thematically rather than chronologically.

In the first of these, Parry discusses the widening of the franchise, the taming of the House of Lords and the intermittent Liberal enthusiasm for proportional representation.

Asquith’s battles with the Lords will be familiar to all, but the Liberal attitude to the widening of the franchise was more ambivalent than you might imagine. The Liberal Party, Parry argues, was forged in the struggle for parliamentary reform, but that was not the same thing as democratic reform.

### OLD ABUSES

So the Reform Act of 1832 swept away many of the abuses of the old system – notably 143 rotten boroughs, which effectively allowed seats in the Commons to be bought – but it was not born out of zeal for any abstract principle of democracy. Rather, it was intended to make sure the Commons did its job of representing the country’s various interests and allowing the peaceful expression of grievances.

Many 19th-century Liberals had their doubts about democracy. John Stuart Mill, for instance, hedged his support for the democratic principle in his Representative Government with all sorts of conditions that would ensure educated opinion was well represented in any elected chamber. Among these conditions was the introduction of proportional representation to ensure that minority points of view were heard.

But other tendencies within the Liberal Party did not share these patrician fears, so no legislation to change the voting system appeared. Nor did it under Asquith,

when the rise of the Labour Party and the consequent inevitability of three-cornered contests led Liberals to explore the virtues of the Alternative Vote.

Parry’s second chapter on Liberal history before 1914 deals with the development of the Liberal attitude towards the state. Gladstonian retrenchment had great appeal earlier in the 19th century when the party was busy attacking the corrupt old city corporations. When these were replaced by elected local councils, school boards and health boards, then the good that government, national and local, might do became of increasing interest to the party. The growth of the Empire also brought with it irresistible pressure for more spending.

The third of these chapters looks at Liberal moves towards a pluralist society, notably in religion, where the party became the champions of Nonconformists in their disputes with the power of the established church and a supporter of Catholic emancipation, both in Britain and Ireland.

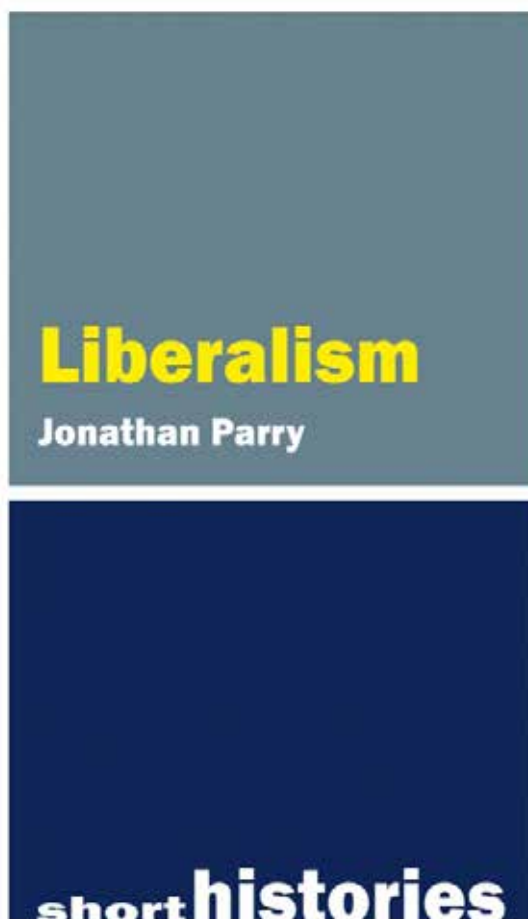
Parry notes that support for Home Rule changed the social basis of the Liberal Party, with most of its members from the landowning classes becoming Liberal Unionists.

Parry’s final two chapters cover the Liberal Party’s long years in the wilderness as it tried to survive as a centre party in a two-party system – and that in an era when politics was principally about economics and the struggle between capital and labour.

There were interesting Liberal economic ideas – the party was putting forward Keynesian policies on the need for public works while Asquith was still leader, and Elliott Dodds’s advocacy of an idiosyncratic blend of Distributism and

private enterprise was influential after World War II – but no single one that voters identified with the party.

The Alliance years are passed over quickly, which is surely fair, as social democracy never did cohere as a force or a philosophy outside the Labour Party. The two most prominent former SDP members of the new Liberal Democrats, Charles Kennedy and Robert Maclellan, were already pretty much Liberals by the



time the parties merged.

Nor did The Orange Book have much discernible long-term effect on the party. Its reputation was always a triumph of marketing over content, as it wasn't the bracing call for an end to 'nanny state' interventionism its adherents sometimes pretended.

The chapter on social policy was thoroughly Blairite, born from middle-class impatience with the lower orders and the way they brought up their children. If only they were better raised, the authors reasoned, there would be less need for public spending on them in later life and taxes could be cut.

And maybe we have always worried too much about economic policy. Today's Liberal Democrats have little to say on the subject, but that didn't stop us electing 72 MPs last year.

Finally, Parry looks at the agenda that the Liberal Democrats have made their own: devolution, civil rights and Europe. Much of it has been party policy since the Grimond years – our early support for British membership of the European Economic Community, in particular, was seen as proof of our farsightedness and proof that, despite all the humiliations of life as a third party, history was on our side. This, I think, explains the reluctance, noted by Parry, of Liberal Democrats to criticise the EU in the years before the referendum.

I enjoyed this breezy and unusually accurate history of the Liberal Party and the Liberal Democrats, but what I will remember most from Liberalism is Parry's discussion of the relationship between a party's philosophy and its practice.

There is a temptation – I have been guilty of this myself – to turn to works by John Stuart Mill or LT Hobhouse or Jo Grimond in search of an expression of Liberal philosophy that will tell us what the party should be saying today. But this is to put the philosophical cart before the horse of practice.

Parry has no truck with this view. This book claims that Liberal leaders such as Lord John Russell, William Gladstone, David Lloyd George, Jo Grimond and Paddy Ashdown are better guides to political Liberalism than theoretical writers such as JS Mill or TH Green. It argues that politics has its own rationale, and that politicians take up bodies of ideas for specific purposes, rather than allowing works of theory to set their policy agendas for them.

## VICTORIAN PUNDITS

This is surely right, as is his reminder that hundreds of Victorian Liberal pundits made interesting and rich contributions to national political debate.

We know much more about these than was once the case, so there is no longer any excuse for elevating Mill or Green into a small elite of Liberal 'thinkers' who have had a transcendental impact on the party's definition.

And when we do read the works of this elite, we are likely to misunderstand what they were about.

Liberal intellectuals such as Green, or later LT Hobhouse, described the aim of Liberalism as the socialisation of individuals into civil society without the intervention of a heavy-handed state that would suppress the energy and self-control that was the essence of their individuality. These writings sound more utopian and radical than they were. They were elegant ways of describing social arrangements that were increasingly visible in many towns by the end of

the century.

And if that is not enough iconoclasm for you, here is Parry on Mill: "On Liberty was not intended as a political party bible but as a contribution to general educated discourse. It was also intended to be provocative. Mill knew that most Victorians would not agree with his underlying assumptions. Most educated Victorians did not see orthodox religion as a restrictive cultural force. On the contrary many of them viewed the issue of liberty through a religious lens. Individual responsibility was responsibility and accountability before God."

Again this is surely right. Gladstone, for one, certainly took this view of liberty.

I shall add Parry's Liberalism to my shelf of very good short books alongside Bryan Magee's ones on Karl Popper and Richard Wagner and James Hawkes's 'shortest histories' of England and Germany.

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Jonathan Calder is a member of the Liberator Collective

Liberalism. By Jonathan Parry. Agenda Publishing (2025), £19.99



### LIBG fringe meeting Wake Up and Smell the Cordite

Fringe meeting at Liberal Democrat conference, 20 September, 1pm BIC Bayview Suite 2.

The object of the meeting is to dispel any doubts delegates might have about how dangerous and unstable the world is, and the real threat to the long peace we in mainland Britain have enjoyed. Speakers; Calum Miller MP, Edward Lucas (on Russia), Rebecca Tinsley (on USA). Defence spokesperson Helen Maguire and former defence minister Sir Nick Harvey have been invited to contribute. invited.



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## **CITIZENS, CONSUMERS AND FISH PIE**

*Dear Liberator,*

I read Julian Ingram's article "We're in the Service Sector" (Liberator 430) with something close to despair.

Julian makes many relevant points – about the breakdown of traditional party loyalties, about the impact of poor public service delivery and about Reform's ability to mobilise people who don't normally vote (in local elections, anyway) – but he elides public service delivery to individuals (which can be closely compared with private sector delivery) with essentially political public activity that cannot be broken down to a series of individual transactions.

The provision of a public library is not just a series of book transactions because the library is valued as a community space and an emblem of community. The future of a piece of urban waste ground is a community issue that can only be resolved by making a decision that will leave some people dissatisfied, though perhaps less so if they perceive that the decision was fairly taken after genuine listening.

He also assumes that citizens can and should be treated as consumers and ignores the concept of citizenship which is fundamental to Liberalism, especially in the British tradition.

A consumer (or 'customer' as in being 'customer-centred') is purely interested in what she or he can get out of a transaction. A citizen is aware of duties - for example, to report crime from which she has not personally suffered, or to pay taxes without deceit - and is concerned about the interests of others. A consumer consumes; a citizen participates. It is even possible to act like a citizen in commercial transactions: if I find a foreign object in my supermarket fish pie and I report it, instead of just not buying that brand again, I am acting like a citizen.

Despite the pervasiveness of commercial relations and thinking, most people actually value community and want to be citizens. But government prevents them, by taking decision-making further and further from local communities and by outsourcing to obscure contractors.

Julian assumes public service delivery is inefficient and unresponsive. Some of it is awful, mainly through underfunding and over-regulation. But weighting up my dealing with private and public sectors, I'm not sure public is worse. At least you don't encounter the cowboys and main-chancers and having found some commercial websites complicated and unintuitive, I couldn't praise more highly that of the DVLA.

Political parties are indeed often poor at delivery (though complainers tend to ignore hard-working local councillors who do deliver), but their "lack of emotional connection" suggests a different kind of issue, more to do with a managerialism that precisely does focus on delivery but not on vision. All the parties stand for giving us a better service.

I dispute that Reform voters are "transactional". I've met plenty and their motivation varies from a

loathing of immigration and 'woke', through a feeling that the country is going to the dogs, to feeling officialdom doesn't listen and doesn't care (but does listen to someone else), to just enjoying being a rebel and kicking something, to a belief that public service employees and representatives are all on the make or lazy.

Providing a better service is unlikely to shift them: like the low-level racist who says, "That black gentleman two doors down is lovely, but...", they will discount the experience and stick to their perception. What might possibly shift them would be a radical change to make our politics and public service more local, more open and more responsive.

If voters must be treated just as consumers and not as citizens, Liberalism is dead and democracy will soon follow.

Simon Banks  
Harwich

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## **SLF REBUILDS**

*Dear Liberator,*

In reply to Andy Bennett's letter (Liberator 430) asking, "where's the SLF" and quite rightly accusing us of having a website and social media years out of date, I'll do my best to give you some answers.

Of course, if we start from the perspective of the times were living through, how can it be possible for the SLF to seem so incapable, surely such fertile territory should be generating a huge response?

Well, here's what's been going on over the last few years and why, and with a small taster of what's about to happen.

Firstly, on a day-to-day basis we're very much alive. The elections for SLF council held at the end of last year saw a third of places going to young liberals and our away weekend in Birmingham then concluded that we have two core areas of concern,

Firstly purpose, 'Who are the Liberal Democrats and what do they want? Concluding that expecting public perception of our purpose to be delivered through a list of worthy policies clearly isn't working.

Secondly, economics. Our economy consistently fails to deliver the opportunities and life chances that our society demands let alone the tax revenue to fund the services we desire. Simply accepting *laissez faire* economics is simply not enough.

Exploring these two topics then over the last few years has seen us holding events on these themes at conferences and from the NLC culminating with our recent conference in St Albans.

The conclusion reached through all of this work will become obvious at national conference so please visit the SLF stall to learn more, but integral to this will be our website and social media which is in the final stages of a complete rebuild. No longer will we be promoting pages years out of date, but we will be offering a great deal more not just for SLF members but also for the wider party.

Our fringe events for national conference will be important but it's what we do after this that will finally offer the change that normal members desire.

John Shreeve  
Chair, Social Liberal Forum

## IN SECOND PLACE

Dear Liberator,

I would like to correct an error in Liberator 430. The review of Jacinda Ardern's book says she was "the first elected world leader to give birth whilst in office, she speaks about all manner of challenges that only she can attest to".

All credit to Jacinda Ardern for running a country during a pandemic at the same time as becoming a new mother - an amazing feat no man has yet pulled off - but she was the second woman to do so.

The first was Benazir Bhutto, the elected prime minister of Pakistan, who gave birth to a daughter in that role in 1990. I was working in Pakistan at the time. She deserves enormous credit for doing that whilst also being the first woman to lead a democratic government in a Muslim majority country.

She was assassinated while running for the office of prime minister for a third term in 2007. May she rest in peace.

Ann Keeling  
Eastbourne



# REVIEWS

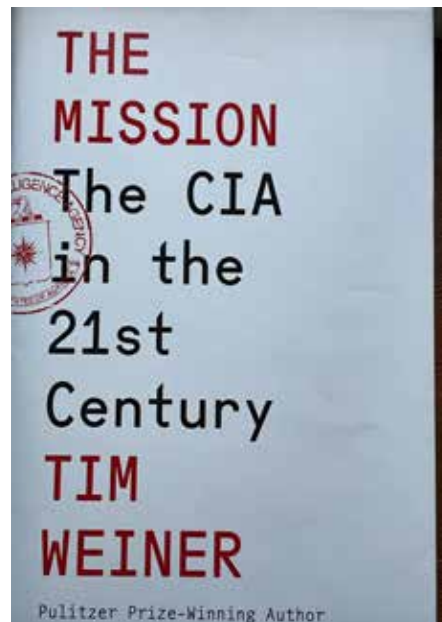
### **The Mission: The CIA In The 21st Century** by Tim Weiner William Collins

Donald Trump isn't the first US president to ignore his intelligence agencies. Reading this disturbing chronicle of American missteps reminds us of the ignorance of the George W Bush White House (on all aspects of Iraq), the naivety of Obama (on Russian cyberattacks), and the arrogance of Biden (the withdrawal from Afghanistan).

In the months before 9/11, the CIA warned repeatedly that a profoundly serious Al Qaeda attack was in the works, but their intel was dismissed by Condi Rice, the National Security Advisor, because the administration was obsessed by Iraq.

The fraudster Ahmed Chalabi contradicted CIA doubts about WMD, conning the US taxpayers out of hundreds of millions of dollars to support his plans to foment an uprising against Saddam.

America was clueless about Iraq because Saddam had killed any opponent who might pass information to it. And the CIA knew little about Al Qaeda because the institution had been hollowed out by politicians after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The CIA lacked the language skills to interrogate the detainees they tortured so brutally, or the context to understand what



they were told.

For all their arrogance, the Americans emerge as gullible, with Pakistan playing Washington for decades, while actively supporting the Taliban and Al Qaeda. In one episode, Pakistani leader Musharraf persuaded vice-president Dick Cheney to evacuate hundreds of ISI (Pakistani intelligence) officers from Kunduz, north of Kabul, "to save Pakistani dignity" as the Taliban closed in. The 'ISI officers' were Musharraf's friends in the Taliban and Al Qaeda who the USA duly ferried to the tribal wild west of Waziristan where they continue to cause immense suffering to the Pakistani population.

The US taxpayer has also shelled

out \$50bn to mass murderers running Egypt ("an island of stability") since Camp David; \$600m to Erik Prince's Blackwater mercenaries; and they continue to give Pakistan \$6bn a year, despite their serial deception.

The money trousered by President Karzai and his drug-dealer brother in Afghanistan, and sundry war lords in Iraq is literally beyond calculation. No wonder that American voters liked it when Trump promised no more foreign entanglements.

The White House never grasped that America's reckless footprint was a recruiting tool for Islamists and other terrorists. Weiner recounts the shambles after the overthrow of Saddam. The White House "had no plan", and as Richard Armitage, the deputy Secretary of State, remarked, "Bush didn't know why he was president."

Paul Bremer, appointed by the White House to run Iraq, famously fired Baath Party members, including all the security services who promptly joined jihadist insurgencies and stole the Iraqi army's weapons which had been left unguarded by US troops.

The insurgents brought poverty and unimaginable suffering to the people of Iraq, once a middle-income nation where Iraqi women's rights were envied by females across the Muslim world. The instability continues there to this day, with Iran in de facto control in Baghdad and Islamic State biding



their time until Trump withdraws America's remaining forces.

As Weiner says, it took four years for the Americans to ask themselves why so many Iraqis had become their enemies and what the insurgents wanted, or to see the connections with Syria and Iran. They were clueless.

Weiner's chapters on rendition to black sites (Egypt, Poland, Morocco, Romania, Lithuania, Thailand) reveals that useful information was divulged before torture began, and detainees produced rubbish thereafter, hoping to stop the interrogations. The author also reminds us that torture wasn't a rogue CIA operation: Bush approved it.

Through all of this, Bush preferred the positive spin he got from the US military rather than the CIA's gloomy reports. Like Nixon, (and now Trump), Bush thought the CIA were a bunch of "leftists" seeking to undermine him.

Some of the book's other highlights: the remarkably arrogant General David Petraeus handed highly sensitive CIA information to his mistress who was writing her PhD; for years, the CIA ignored social media and other open source information because it wasn't 'secret'; during the first Trump election campaign, his people held 38 meetings with the Russians and 272 email or phone conversations with them – and the CIA was unaware of Russian bots spreading disinformation about Hillary Clinton on Facebook; Obama refused to reveal this Russian interference because he



didn't want to be seen as biased, a piety shared by many Democrats who still don't realise we are in new times; neither the CIA nor the US army foresaw the immediate collapse of the Afghan government when the US withdrew four years ago; and two weeks before Hamas attacked Israel on 7 October, Jake Sullivan, the National Security Advisor, said the Middle East was quieter than it had been for two decades.

A fascinating read for those who are interested in the decline and fall of the American empire.

Rebecca Tinsley

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### **Lord Clegg Awakes Courtyard Theatre by Horace Smith and Virgil Soloman.**

Billing a play in 2025 as a musical comedy about Nick Clegg rather raises the 'why now' question.

Clegg like, say, John Major and Neil Kinnock, makes occasional elder statesman interventions but is hardly in the front rank of public life. Surely the time for satirising him was a decade ago?

The energetic young cast give it their best shot from Clegg's youthful cactus arsonist role onwards and there is a genuinely funny sequence when George Osborne - as the Prince of Darkness - talks Clegg into reneging on his tuition fees pledge. Humour is also found in Gordon Brown obsessing

about the Tories showing him smiling on posters and a song about the AV referendum, which explains the working of a AV in the most complicated way imaginable.

Clegg overall comes across as well-meaning but out of his depth (so rather like in real life) and unaware of what he stands for beyond not being like the other parties. His repeated claims to be a 'radical centrist' raised loud laughter from the audience, which might warn the Lib Dems off re-using this slogan.

There were though some fundamental production problems. Words sung in unison by 12 people to a loud echoing piano were just lost, although they seemed witty in the snatches that were intelligible. A decision to make David Cameron an American was merely weird.

A lot of fringe theatre is seen once then vanishes forever. If this is staged again by prepared for a fun romp though not for exact accuracy or any startling insight.

Mark Smulian

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### **Allies at War: The Politics of Defeating Hitler by Tim Bouverie Bodley Head £25**

"There is only one thing worse than fighting a war with allies and that is fighting without them"  
Winston Churchill

Churchill's pithy phrase sums up



his predicament at the beginning of the Second World War, after the fall of France, the long period that followed up to Pearl Harbour, when Britain was alone facing the Nazi menace. The extraordinary RAF victory over the Luftwaffe at the Battle of Britain helped a great deal giving Britain a certain moral authority when dealing with her eventual allies.

Bouverie has written a book which is enjoyable to read, his writing style is never overwhelmed by his vast mountain of research. An amount of research gained from working on the book for longer than the events it describes; that is longer than the Second World War. This book differs from the very many books written covering this period in history. Rather than recount battles or tales of espionage, it deals with an extraordinary feat of diplomacy. Churchill knew he couldn't defeat the Nazis without the United States. After fighting alone up to the end of 1941 he managed to drag together Stalin, after the Russo-German Non-Aggression Pact and Roosevelt finally joining the alliance after Pearl Harbour. A quite brilliant diplomatic achievement; the Germans assumed they would be undefeated because they never believed such an alliance would hold for the duration.

The term special relationship between Britain and the US was, from the start, a very one sided affair. Britain was practically bankrupted by the US prior to the start of Lend Lease in 1941. By 1940 the British Ambassador, Lord Lothian announced to reporters on arrival at La Guardia airport in New York, that Britain was running out of money. Forced by the Neutrality Act to pay cash for all goods obtained in the US. Britain spent more than \$1.3bn on American material since the start of the war.

In order meet the vast expenditure the British had been liquidating their US securities and gold reserves. By the autumn of 1940 British dollar reserves had fallen to around \$600m; the minimum deemed necessary to maintain essential trade with other parts of the world. When Lend Lease was finally proposed by Roosevelt it passed through Congress in March 1941.

Lend Lease made an estimable contribution to the allied victory with something in the order of \$50bn worth of goods leaving the US for the allied nations between March 1941 and September 1945. The enormous loan to Britain was finally paid off in 2006.

Roosevelt distrusted the British partly because assumed that they were richer than they claimed because of the British Empire. Roosevelt's mistrust was a minor thing when compared to the other member of the alliance the genocidal dictator Stalin. His secret police the NKVD was even more ruthless than the Nazi Gestapo, having killed more people by 1939. An appalling cynic who first entered into the Russo-German non-aggression pact - an axis of evil if ever there was.

In the end the breakdown of the grand alliance was an event that none of its participants desired and yet each seems powerless to prevent. After six years of unrelenting struggle and untold suffering victory was achieved in the summer of 1945 but not before the seeds of a new conflict had already been sown. Do read Bouverie's book, if you do, you in for a thoroughly enjoyable read.

Peter Johnson

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## **Underdogs: The Truth about Britain's White Working Class** by Joel Budd Picador £20

Joel Budd tackles the issue of the white working class in an account based largely on anecdotal evidence. Although describing the white working class as a distinct group, he points out that it is not homogenous.

There are the enclaves which are overwhelmingly white working class areas usually in areas where manufacturing industry has declined or coalfields. There are the enclaves on the outskirts of increasingly diverse cities which are becoming increasingly ethnically diverse.

There are also the colonies where the white working class have relocated from elsewhere particularly in new towns. He also describes communities' white working class migrants largely from eastern Europe and that Irish

immigration played a similar role in the past. Budd leaves Northern Ireland alone on the grounds that its politics and society are distinctive. There is also very little about Scotland other than the two referendums and no reference to the sectarianism that is rife in parts of the industrial central area reaching its height in Glasgow. His account is based almost entirely on anecdotal evidence gained from interviews.

We are informed about the world of car modification as well as armed robbery which involved only tiny minority of the white working class and is thankfully on the decline.

Budd argues that the white working class is a distinct group compared to other disadvantaged groups citing education in particular and lack of educational aspiration is being a major problem.

He eschews the view that it is the general issue of class that is involved. He rejects any analysis that there is any concerted effort to favour non-white people over them but ignores that various affirmative action schemes may have the same effect by default.

He is better on analysis than solutions although acknowledging that tackling poverty in admission to nursery and primary schools may have a role. He is not in favour of increasing social housing. Budd is a journalist from the Economist and is seeing things from that perspective.

Budd mentions that the working class is diverse but doesn't seem to acknowledge that class itself is an issue that needs to be included in any measures to increase diversity. Commentators such as Kenan Malik have pointed out that the issues of class and race are interrelated when disadvantage is considered.

While not being a source of solutions the book is essential reading if we are ever to make any progress in red wall areas and the white working class is an issue that needs to be considered if we are to do anything more than contain reform.

Andrew Hudson

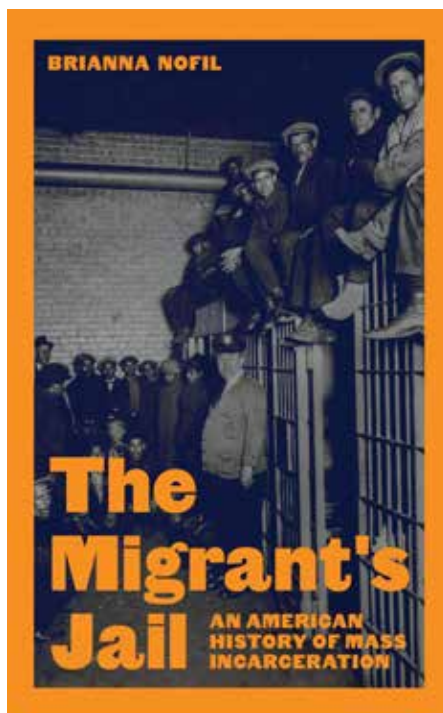
## **The Migrant's Jail: An American History of Mass Incarceration by Brianna Nofil Princeton University Press, 2024 £28**

This is a book about the history of migrant detention in the United States, from the early 20th century to today. It is well-researched, setting out both the wider political context and individual migrants' stories. However, it fails to put forward an alternative approach to enforcing immigration law, which is desperately needed on both sides of the Atlantic.

Nofil's key point is that the US federal government uses a network of local jails (usually at the county level) to detain immigrants, which she argues leads to a range of problems, such as a dispersed and ever-changing network of detention centres so it is difficult for anyone to understand what is happening, the blurring of lines between those detained for alleged breaches of criminal law, and immigrants and financial incentives for counties to make money while providing minimum service, with limited federal oversight of detention conditions.

Nofil also discusses time periods when federal detention centres or privately-run institutions were more popular, but these arrangements did not appear to mean better conditions. She makes a compelling case that many immigrants have suffered in detention, subject to the whims of politicians, police and judges.

A lot of the book is clearly US-centric, and stems from particular characteristics in that country, such as the division of powers between agencies and levels of government. However, some of the broader points are worthy of being considered elsewhere. For example, a common theme is the extent to which immigration policy is decided by political changes which are beyond any immigrant's control. Someone's experience of the system, including whether they are detained at all, is often arbitrarily determined by these political moods. At the beginning of the book, she describes how fear of the 'Chinese Problem' led to the Chinese Exclusion Act, and many Chinese people being



detained in the early 1900s. In the 1960s and 1970s, attention turned to detaining people from Haiti, as the US decided to support the Haitian government and so would not recognise people fleeing the Caribbean country as refugees.

Although the exact time periods and affected nationalities will vary, many modern countries, such as the UK, will have adopted similar approaches of favouring or fearing different source countries over time. We would expect similar stories of an arbitrary increased risk of detention or deportation for nationals from certain countries as they fell out of favour with their country of destination.

However, the easy conclusion of innocent immigrants versus a cruel and bureaucratic government misses the nuances. In the opening chapter, when she describes the Chinese Exclusion Act, Nofil explains that it was common practice for Chinese nationals to claim that they were US citizens, although they did not have any papers to prove this. As the US authorities could often not disprove their claim, after some time in detention, the Chinese migrants were usually released. Nofil does not explain how else the US government should have dealt with people who (as seems generally acknowledged) were fraudulently claiming to be US citizens and did not have any legitimate claim to be in the country.

Leaving aside the obviously racist motivation, there is a basic

question to be answered of how a government should enforce its immigration laws. But Nofil does not set out any solution to the issues she has identified. There are some suggestions that she does not support any form of detention for immigrants, such as when she criticises migrants for being treated in the same way as criminals. However, it is unclear what measures she does consider the federal government should use to enforce immigration law - or if she thinks that it should be enforced at all.

Some of this book seems defeatist and the reader may be left with the impression that enforcing immigration law in a fair and compassionate way is impossible, so there is no point trying. If Nofil is advocating for completely open borders, it would be an oversight not to make that radical position express in the book.

So, we are therefore left with the unsatisfactory conclusion that all attempts in the US to date to enforce immigration law are flawed (and many of the problems probably also exist elsewhere), but there is nothing better on the horizon. Avoiding the debate entirely is not a tenable position in a world where stricter immigration enforcement is on the rise. Leaving it in the hands of only those who care little for the humane treatment of immigrants does not seem to be outcome that Nofil would want.

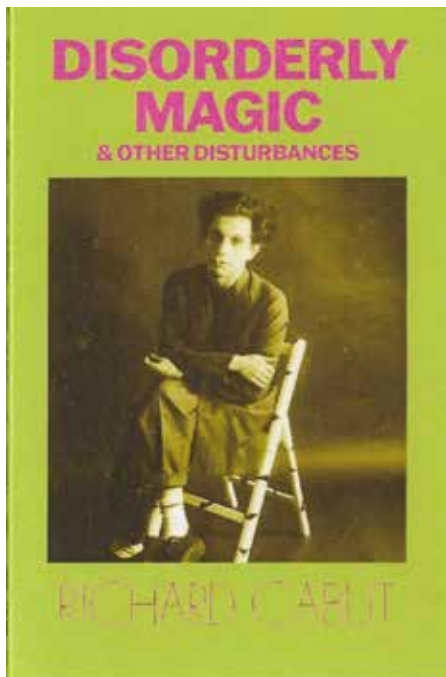
Eleanor Healy-Birt

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## **Environmental Lobbying at the United Nations: A Guide to Protecting Our Planet by Felix Dodds and Chris Spence**

Some readers will recall Felix Dodds from his days as Chair of the National League of Young Liberals in the mid-1980s. Since then, he has carved out a career within the United Nations, especially in the field of sustainability and developing new models of stakeholder engagement. He is currently an adjunct professor at the University of North Carolina's Water Institute and a consultant advising stakeholders on United Nations engagement.

Along with Chris Spence, an environmentalist, award-winning



writer and former leader of non-profits in New York, New Zealand, and California he has written a step-by-step, insiders' guide on how to lobby and engage successfully at the United Nations.

It explains how the United Nations, which plays such a key role on issues from climate change to pollution of land, sea and air, really works. The United Nations is more important than ever as we face the rapid acceleration of the world-wide climate emergency, while also decried more than ever for inaction, inefficiencies and a lack of democratic representation.

This book acts as a guide for individuals and stakeholder organisations who want to effectively engage with it. It starts with the basics, how to attend an event and what all the acronyms and jargon words mean, to advice on understanding how the mysterious world of international diplomacy works.

It's a practical lobbying guide, written from the perspective of a combined 60 years' experience in intergovernmental and multilateral negotiations and includes interviews with other experts in the field and training materials designed by the authors to assist outsiders on decoding the UN world and how to be effective from their first meetings with it, particularly in the environmental arena and engaging with the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

We are all experienced at advocating, lobbying and negotiating in our personal and professional

lives, but many people who start working with the UN haven't received formal training in negotiating and lobbying, which is exactly the group of people this guide is written for. It is informative, engaging, and highly readable, with the intention of demonstrating how to break down barriers, get on the inside track on how the system works, or more often doesn't, where to find the power, reveals where some may think it is but it isn't, and other such opaque and obscure information, enabling lobbyists to use their skills to their best advantage. If I may borrow from another famous lobbyist, it's all about being in the room where it happens.

Liberator readers can use the code 25ESA3 to get 25% off when buying the book directly from the publisher Routledge

Louise Harris

## **Disorderly Magic and Other Disturbances audio release by Richard Cabut**

Many years ago, I made a mental note not to review poetry, why make a bigger fool of myself? The Fool is of course a transitional archetype. When asked to review the cassette of Richard Cabut's *Disorderly Magic* I should have resisted; I don't even have a working cassette player - that could be resolved.

A punk poet, most of my collection of punk rock was on cassette, much of it badly recorded at concerts, unplayable by the time I left London more than a decade ago. That somebody was still using the cassette as a medium was enticing in itself. Of course, I did not have the book, could not locate it in any of the small independent book shops close by me. But perhaps that's the point; poetry is an aural medium. Listen to it; take it for its word.

This immediately became a best seller; the cassette is the chosen medium. Although I read a lot of poetry, aloud, fleeting references can elude you. Without the reference of the printed word, it is best to dwell on the familiar and see where that takes you.

Cabut opens reflecting on a screening of Andy Warhol's *Chelsea*

Girls in the Scala cinema, King's Cross. Was this some kind of golden age for the punk imagination; Lou Reed, Nico, the Factory and all that. The Chelsea Hotel, 222 West 23rd Street, Manhattan, had seen better days by the time of Warhol's film. Dylan Thomas to Bob Dylan, what would become a glittering literati passed through and with them, as urban decay set in, drug use, prostitution and who knows what else? It now only exists in name and memory; each in conflict with the other. At 3.5 hours and each screening unique as the dark and light of the twin projections don't quite synchronise, years on, I can't recall how closely Cabut follows the dialogue, but his poetry takes on the proportions of the works of Blake or Swinburne.

He cannot linger between the frames of the film. Soon we are out in the streets, not just King's Cross, his *Chelsea Girls* roam the metropolis, the punk femmes of his youth. The Portobello Hotel was not the Chelsea Hotel, though it might have liked to have been - neither are what they once were; London is not New York. One can recall his *Chelsea Girls*, more alive than Warhol could make them out to be. They say there is no poetry to be extracted from my life, yet here we are, in print somewhere and on cassette, poetry revealing personality disorder. Cabut used the term 'Disorderly Magic' in his memoir of Jordan, what better example could there be?

Cabut's urban landscapes seem to revel in squalor; the Aylesbury and White City Estates are iconic, I always sought to make the best of them, though not a journey I ever took, many of the streets betwixt are familiar and full of wonders if you really look. Can the flaneur travel by taxi?

Sans text, does Cabut stray from 'angel' to the Polish 'anio?' in his account of his mother's journey? It sounds like it (I later discover this was the case, reciprocating). She was one of two million Poles deported to Siberia on 10 February 1940 when Russia invaded eastern Poland as part of its pact with Nazi Germany; Socialism in action, trust nobody who thinks they have the solution.

Her village is now within Ukraine. Poland was part of the Soviet empire from 1944 to 1993 when the last troops withdrew.



After a despairing journey Cabut's mother eventually settled in Dunstable, Bedfordshire, where his journey (almost) ends in Ghost Music, his family predeceasing him, personal resurrection apart. Yet the room of his first memory cannot contain him, he is off to Godard's Alphaville, down paths traced by Borges and Éluard, a poet first. Cabut's poetry is best when it is most personal.

So, we have travelled down streets of alienation, people living in cities to be alone; in presenting his work through the spoken word does Cabut's poetry seek to escape or celebrate this?

What would I say to the poet? Be concise; even as performance poetry your pieces are generally too long; were I to read them, would they hold my attention? Yes, I think, where they are most personal, but would the poem's free verse hold me where it digresses?

Cabut's voice is underlaid by a continuo of 'ambient dark jazz sonic landscapes', chosen himself and carefully mixed to enhance, not overpower (the hand of Fritz Catlin?). Paul T Kirk (Akatombo) provides the backing to Chelsea Girls; Necessary Animals to Disorderly Magic, which was previously known as Unkempt Magic; Simon Beesley, of June Brides, In The City; Deptford's Band Of Holy Joy, 10th Floor; Keith Rodway, Anio?; and AKA (Anthony Moore, Keith Rodway & Amanda Thompson) to Ghost Music. A veritable cast. If you are like Colin from Froth on the Daydream, you'll be needing this... at least once.

How do you acquire this gem? Try <https://dashthehengestore.com/> - the Disorderly Magic cassette was launched there on 2d May... you probably need to visit the store anyway. Otherwise Far West Press is the main distributor - they ship worldwide from New York..

The book, incidentally, is published by Far West Press, isbn 979898506755 – many more poems than on the cassette, but Chelsea Girls are greedy and take up a lot of space. You don't have to use bibliomancy to know that pataphysics is the only science.

Stewart Rayment

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## Mania by Lionel Shriver Borough Press 2024 £22

Mania is set in an America where history has taken a different course and where referring to anyone's low IQ is outlawed and everyone is regarded as intellectually equal in all tests and TV quizzes.

The book is written from the point of view of the narrator who loses her job and her children through failing to conform to the new norm. The narrative starts off slowly dealing with the development of newspeak but progresses to the consequences of taking arguments to their logical conclusion when it is applied to STEM subjects resulting in America and Europe becoming a laughing stock and falling behind Russia and China which is why things would never go that far even in Trump's America with its scepticism of science and the inevitable backlash would start a lot quicker.

There is an element of a Sliders episode except that instead of the narrator sliding it ends with a swing to the opposite direction with IQ tests being proposed for voter eligibility and the narrator becoming a reluctant folk hero. As with Sliders Mania is not a work of alternate history or science fiction but satire

Andrew Hudson

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## The 51st State by David Scott 2024

Dr Kevin Dixon's review of the first of David Scott's Seagull Trilogy, put the question 're the Nazi plots in 'Operation Seagull' successful leading to the German occupation of Britain; or do we realise the danger we are in and repel the planned invasion?' (interLib 2022-02 page 16). If you missed it, the giveaway is that in the third volume, the Germans are still here, and no, we didn't, though the nature of a Nazi invasion have come to roost.

David was an evangelist of community politics in the late 60s & 1970s and turned the newly created Braintree constituency into a three-party marginal in the February 1974 general election. A journalist, he declined the

editorship of Liberal News later in the decade, opting for the more secure Romford Recorder instead. He later moved to Torquay, helping Adrian Sanders take the seat in 1997 and focussing his career on training journalists.

Journalism and politics are underlying themes in David's fictional writing, counterfactuals for the trilogy arising out of his foray into local history, The Funk Hole Myth. Rupert Tremaine is the right-wing editor of the local newspaper who has abetted the Nazis and enjoys favour with certain factions,

The counterfactual assumes many of the standards – King/ Government in exile in Canada, Edward VIII restored to the throne, Stalin is removed early after the German invasion but Scott underplays the brutality of a Nazi occupation (even though commonsense might have been to win over the occupied population, this didn't happen elsewhere, so why here? Think the Channel Islands). Nor the inevitable British resistance, perhaps that would have been less significant away from major commercial centres if you take the case as stated in Operation Seagull. However, our players are of a more privileged section of society, so though many are based on real people we don't want history to get in the way of the tale.

The 51st State may give you some clues as to how the tale is going to end up and like Kevin, I won't spoil this by giving more away; there is a twist. Decide on the plausibility, point by point, yourselves. Enjoy the argument.

The book can be obtained through David at [DScottTorq@aol.com](mailto:DScottTorq@aol.com)

Stewart Rayment



## Monday

You will rarely hear me defend Donald Trump. As far as I'm concerned, the sooner he visits Dallas and its notorious School Book Suppository the better. Nevertheless, I declined to join the Dutch concert of ridicule that greeted his appearance on the roof of the White House the other day, for I am often to be found on the roof of Bonkers Hall myself. Up here, I can keep an eye out for Well-Behaved Orphans trying to scale the wall, make sure Meadowcroft is not slacking and scan the horizon in case the Duke of Rutland is up to his old tricks. This afternoon I'm enjoying the sight of muckspreading taking place on the fields next to Freddie and Fiona's weekend cottage. You may say this is unseasonal, but I'm told the pair were talking in the Bonkers Arms the other evening of taking a "cheeky midweek break", so it seems exceedingly well timed to me.

## Tuesday

Calling by my Home for WBOs earlier today, I heard Matron tell a boy that if he didn't eat his cabbage he would "end up like Lembit Öpik". I suspected it was rot, but just to be on the safe side I asked Cook to be sure to serve cabbage this evening. When I explained my reasons, she sniffed and said: "I never cared for that young man. It was something to do with the way he spelt his name with an omelette."

Cook worked her usual magic, and dinner – cabbage and all – was delicious. Afterwards I watched a news report about a church being trundled several miles across a Swedish city on a sort of giant roller skate. It occurs to me that if Farron ever gets his way at St Asquith's – he wants to rip out the pews and have us all sing "Shine, Jesus, Shine" – I can use a similar contraption to move the old place a safe distance from the Hall. I just hope the Revd Hughes remains Sound on such matters.

## Wednesday

Westminster in high summer is strangely deserted – the irony is that I normally have to dodge F&F when here, but today I've come to the House to be sure of avoiding them. The Whitehall mandarins have left for Tuscany or the grouse moors, and the only politico you see is the odd junior minister who's been naughty and made to stay behind. Otherwise, the streets are given over to feral cats and foxes.

As a result, when I chance upon a Labour peer we clap each other heartily upon the back and make a beeline for one of my clubs. Said peer then unfolds a tale that makes my each particular hair to stand on end like quills upon the fretful porpentine. (A good line that: I got it from our own Manuela Perteghella.) It seems the prime minister was locked in a store cupboard in No. 10 for the best part of a fortnight and had to survive on luxury biscuits and those boiled sweets they have at meetings with flipcharts. "Whatever did you people do?" I ask. "That's the worrying thing," replies my companion. "No one noticed for the first ten days."

## Thursday

A lunch invitation from the Professor of Hard Sums at the University of Rutland gives me the opportunity to put to bed once and for all a story that the leader of His Majesty's opposition has been putting about. I can confirm that La Badenoch was not offered a place in

# Lord Bonkers' Diary

his prestigious department without even having applied for one, let alone a fully-funded scholarship and chauffeur-driven Rolls. Next time I find myself in one of Fleet Street's watering holes, I shall whisper this news in the ear of someone from the Manchester Guardian. Meanwhile, my efforts to discover Nick Clegg's A level grades will go on.

## Friday

Freddie and Fiona's friends will be popping champagne corks, but I

think the resignation of Angela Rayner is a damned shame. For an outfit that styles itself "the Labour Party", the present government is notably short of people who give you the impression they've ever done a hard day's work. And given that half the last Conservative cabinet owned more houses than even I do, they should have kept their snoots out of the affair. Who knows what a close scrutiny of their paperwork would reveal?

## Saturday

What a way to start the day! I am summoned to Oakham nick to stand bail for Meadowcroft, who has spent the night in the cells. It transpires that he was arrested in the village yesterday afternoon for carrying a dangerous weapon; this turns out to be the Japanese pruning sickle that Freddie and Fiona gave him the other day. (To be fair to the rozzers, it does look like something a samurai would take with him if he was going to have it out with another samurai.) I really think those two will have to be Dealt With.

To cool myself down, I spend the evening sharing a bush with a rather put out mallard and one of my gamekeepers and his orchard doughty. We Midland landowners have been on our toes ever since word got about that the British foreign secretary (at least he was this morning) David Lammy and America's VP JD are in the habit of fishing without licences. I tend to leave questions of fishing rights on Rutland Water to my old friend Ruttie, the Rutland Water Monster, who is equally adept at dealing with lone poachers and foreign-owned trawlers, but I retain command of the lakes on the Bonkers Hall Estate. Neither bigwig puts in an appearance, but we shall be ready for them when they do.

## Sunday

When I heard there had been a fire at the Bournemouth International Centre, I naturally assumed it was the latest ruse by the party's high-ups to justify the cancellation of our Autumn Conference. In recent years this gathering of the Liberal clans has been canned because of, variously, the Covid pandemic, the death of Her late Majesty and a threatened bombing campaign by Isle of Wight Separatists. Fortunately, the excellent men and women of the Dorset & Wiltshire Fire Service slid down their poles with the utmost dispatch and extinguished the blaze before serious damage was done. And so, failing another Japanese attack on Poole Harbour, I shall see you all at the Liberator stall in Bournemouth.

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