

liberator



Trump threatens Greenlanders

- Under fire in Ukraine - Adam McQuire
- Sudan's blood seen from space - Rebecca Tinsley
- May election prospects - Ron Blackie, Peter Black and Nigel Lindsay

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LIBERATOR

ISSN 2755-5097

was founded in 1970 and is produced by a voluntary editorial collective.

acts as a forum for debate among radical liberals in all parties and none

welcomes written contributions on relevant topics, up to 1800 words

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Liberator Publications
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COMMENTARY

KICK IN THE NUTS IN MAY

London, Scotland and Wales are very different places but have four-yearly all-out elections in common, and Liberator's commentators on these have something in common too - they all predict a kicking for Labour of such disastrous proportions in May that the phrase 'mid term blues' will do it little justice.

Historians will long debate how Labour fell from its triumph in 2024 to the low support it now retains, since this should have been a government with a lot going for it and able to take some risks to make changes.

After the chaos of the later Tory years all evidence suggested the country wanted a government of the pragmatic centre-left led by a figure who exuded calm professionalism.

Instead, Labour has spent 18 months indulging in u-turns and internal disputes while being incapable of explaining to the country what it is doing, why it is doing it and what it hopes to achieve beyond the vaguest indications.

Kier Starmer, who could have been that calm reassuring figure after the madness of Boris Johnson and Liz Truss, comes across as barely in control of his own government and with his position - remarkably - in some danger less than two years after a landslide win.

How Labour got itself into this mess is a matter for debate but what is clear is that no other party played any real role in getting it there. Labour is not facing catastrophe in May because of some political masterstroke by Ed Davey, Kemi Badenoch, Nigel Farage or anyone else. It has done this all by itself.

If our pundits are right, May will see Labour lose swathes of territory that it as previously taken for granted and in which it has seen no real need to campaign - in the Welsh valleys, the central belt of Scotland and inner London to give only a few examples.

What will replace it? As Peter Black explains in this issue, Wales has a new proportional representation system the outcome of which is largely unpredictable beyond the fact of Labour losses. Nigel Lindsay suggests that Labour is so far gone in its Scottish strongholds that hopes of reviving the pre-2007 Labour-Lib Dem coalition have faded.

London has been largely resistant to Reform but Rob Blake sees it potentially proposing in areas that Labour has neglected and the erstwhile Lib Dem presence never recovered from the Coalition.

Reform is the wild card in these elections, as to some extent are the Greens. Reform has appeared to prosper in areas where no other party is well-organised or where party machines have atrophied over decades of

enjoying safe seats.

The exhibition that Reform has made of itself in the county councils it controls may offer a useful line of attack since the collection of incompetents and racists that Reform saw fit to nominate as candidates has been a steady source of embarrassment to it.

Another source of embarrassment to Reform ought to be its relationship with the unpopular Donald Trump.

Farage has stressed his closeness to America's unpredictable president, whose threatened actions in Greenland and equivocations over Ukraine have gone down badly in the UK.

Ed Davey's line about "Don't let Trump's America become Farage's Britain" is one worth repeating in what may be a rare example of UK local and devolved elections being affected by a foreign policy issue (the Iraq war era was another example).

Council by-elections have looked like a scrap between the Lib Dems and Reform in many places, with Labour and the Tories as bystanders, and the former have been better at taking on the latter than some might think.

And if anyone is looking to electoral pacts with the Greens, read Rob Heale's article in this issue about that party's misgovernment of Brighton & Hove.

NO REPEAT OF THIS

One-member-one-vote for party committee places was supposed to virtuously open up the Lib Dems' internal democracy to allow all members to play a role.

It was also, although this was never explicit, designed to dump awkward radicals off committees because the mass of 'armchair members' were likely to vote only for well-known figures of whom they had heard.

In the event neither has happened. The recent committee elections saw the three elected members of the Federal Board win places on a 7.6% turnout, with that for other committees even lower.

With turnout this poor the results were more or less random with some prominent committee members losing places for no apparent reason, while a concerted effort by the party establishment saw many - though not all - nominated MPs win places, presumably on the basis that voters saw the magic letters 'MP' after their names.

Regardless of who won, the elections themselves were a shambles (Liberator 432) marked by arguments of - surely to most people - baffling complexity over gender quotas and who could identify as what and how.

A hard look is needed at how internal elections are conducted and what can be done to increase participation.

RADICAL BULLETIN

THREE OF A KIND

There will have to be some quick changes from ermine to normal work attire for the three new Lib Dem peers, since all of them will still have, presumably demanding, commitments.

The choice of party chief executive Mike Dixon, Ed Davey's chief of staff Rhiannon Leaman and former MP Sarah Teather as peers has gone down badly with the hard pressed group of existing peers.

They wanted new blood, but they also wanted this to comprise subject experts who would devote their main attention to the Lords to relieve the spokespeople - some octogenarians - who want to step back from the time consuming front line. The number of peers has declined from 110 in 2015 to 75 prior to the new appointments, through the effects of retirements, defections and deaths.

Lords' work needs subjects specialists with few other commitments. Instead they have got two full time party officials plus a former MP who is a subject specialist but who has played no discernible part in the party since standing down in 2015

What has really got the peers' collective goat is that the list of new peers became fairly widely known in the autumn and their objections to having three part-timers were privately made plain to Davey, but he still went ahead with these.

Jeremy Purvis, who became lords leader this autumn, is thought to have been informed of his new colleagues, rather than seriously consulted.

Nor were MPs ecstatic with the choices since some see Leaman as the source of the Daveybunker's increasing control freak tendencies.

Leaman's peerage looks like a reward for a loyal ally and possibly Teather's is the peerage that often comes the way of former MPs.

For Dixon there is a precedent. After masterminding the breakthrough of the 1997 general election, there were fears that Chris Rennard would be lured away and he was given a peerage while remaining head of campaigns.

Dixon often works from home in Oxfordshire, an arrangement that has been successful as chief executive but cannot be used by a working peer, since the house authorities tiresomely insist on peers being physically present both to vote and get the £371 daily allowance.

There is also muttering among the ermine about Leaman's role in the process. There was no shortage of competent and qualified party members interested in peerages, and those that fancied becoming peers were told to approach Leaman to be interviewed on Davey's behalf.

This process ended with a decision that one of the best people for the job was, er, Leaman. Whether she troubled to interview herself is not known.

Lib Dem peerages are rare and the three given do little to solve the problem in the Lords of a lack of active specialists.

There was more welcome news in life peerages for two active hereditary peers, Dominic Addington and John Russell, both of whom would otherwise have been abolished in the government's cull of hereditaries.

Meanwhile Ben Stoneham is due to stand down as lords chief whip sometime in 2026 with the powers that be canvassing support for former party chief executive Chris Fox to take his place.

This job though is not in Davey's gift as every peer has a vote on it. The rather obvious establishment promotion of Fox has drawn in two other contenders, Addington and the low profile Lord Goddard.

A NATION SLEEPS

The party's tortured process of conducting its internal elections (Liberator 432) finally staggered to a close in late November, with disputes still raging about whether there should be quotas by sex, and if so who was entitled to be in which category.

The elections eventually went ahead without such quotas and ironically saw three women elected to the Federal Board - Prue Bray, Hannah Kitching and Janey Little - whereas under the quota system at least one place would have had to go to man.

As the most important committee the FB attracted the highest turnout - a pitiful 7.6% and sinking nearer 6% for some other committees. These are the sorts of turnouts the party would deplore in any public election.

One member one vote was supposed to increase interest in party elections. It hasn't on this showing. Some have complained of technical difficulties with voting, though it's unclear how widespread these were.

The main complaints have been about the number of candidates to wade through and the unoriginality of manifestos, which were hard to access while also voting and all promised to do more or less identical things.

Such a low turnout in an election, which involved most members voting for people they had never heard of or for committees of which they were only dimly aware, produced some odd results.

Federal Conference Committee lost its vice chair Jon Ball not because he had said or done anything that gave offence but simply through quirks of voting.

The same thing happened to Jeremy Hargreaves, vice-chair of Federal Policy Committee (FPC) and for many years among its most active members.

Equally surprising was the eviction of Keith Melton from this committee since he runs Green Liberal Democrats, which must form a substantial voting bloc

were it organised. A similar lack of campaigning by a large affiliated organisation may also have accounted for Social Liberal Forum chair John Shreeve losing his place on FPC.

Voting though was not yet over for those in the East Midlands, where the election for seven representatives to the English Council had to be stopped by returning officer Paul Roberts because “supporting material supplied by two of the candidates for English Council was omitted from the original mailing”. Roberts said this happened in headquarters and was beyond his control.

The cull continued after the elections with the party establishment gathering sufficient votes to oust Duncan Brack as one of two FPC vice-chairs. This was possibly delayed revenge for Brack having signed the November 2023 open letter which, in terms, urged Ed Davey to pull his finger out and develop some clear campaign themes (*Liberator* 421).

During pitches to FPC, Davey studiously ignored Brack throughout his while looking attentive and approving while the other two contenders Mohsin Khan and Lucy Nethsingha spoke.

DON'T MANSION IT

Ed Davey's stance on the government's mansion tax echoes a famous political heckle when Labour prime minister Harold Wilson asked rhetorically “why do I say we need a stronger navy”? Back came the reply: “Because you're in Chatham.”

With Davey it's more “why did you oppose the mansion tax?” “Because I'm the MP for a well-off suburb.”

The mansion tax, a surcharge on properties of the highest values, was originally proposed by Vince Cable, when he was the party's shadow chancellor in 2009, and was endorsed by conference in 2012, though this was later changed to support for new higher value council tax bands.

An open letter of protest signed by among others *Liberator* Collective member Gareth Epps noted: “Liberal Democrats originally adopted this policy because it is right that those with the most wealth should be asked to contribute a little more to fund public services rather than greater burdens being placed on ordinary people who could only dream of having that much wealth. This is a position rooted in our party's fundamental values of fairness and equality.

“Despite this, you have chosen to unilaterally change party policy on this issue in post-budget media rounds by opposing the new mansion tax as being ‘unfair’ and placing the Liberal Democrats in direct opposition to it.”

It observed that even in Kingston-upon-Thames very few households would have to pay the tax.

The letter said it would have been possible for Davey to dissent from the exact form of Labour's tax while still supporting the principle but he instead “chose to publicly u-turn on party policy in media interviews”, a course the signatories called “deeply damaging to the reputation and credibility of the party”.

CLICKETY CLICK - NOT 66

The normally sedate world of Liberal Democrat Women (LDW) was interrupted in December by a confused annual general meeting that ended

with it having proven impossible to conduct the elections and with two constitutional amendments failing to get the required 66% support.

A year ago LDW attracted only some 20 people to its AGM but this year there were 170. Many new members were from the gender critical group Liberal Voice for Women (LVW) and each side of trans rights disputes accuses the other of engaging in a recruitment arms race to inflate the number of likely votes for their candidates for executive roles.

A call went out from LDW to various parts of the party for people to enrol to defeat candidates backed by LVW but this appears to have happened after the deadline for members to be eligible to vote.

Not that it was clear who could be elected to what. There was a constitutional amendment to reduce the number of ordinary executive members from eight to five and replace these with specific officers for communications and social media and membership.

LDW's leadership say this was simply a measure to improve the way in which the executive works without making it larger.

LVW though smelt a rat, reasoning that it would be easier for it to get people elected among eight ordinary posts voted on by STV, rather than in head-to-head contests for specific offices.

The other constitutional amendment sought to tidy up some minor matters but contained oddities like getting the name of the Young Liberals and their former title Liberal Youth the wrong way round, and removing the provision that vacant posts will be filled by the runner-up in any election, rather than by the executive.

Both though failed by falling just short of the 66% two-thirds majority required. LDW has a provision that a constitutional amendment needs a two-thirds majority of those present and entitled to vote, not just those who actually vote, which brought further confusion.

After three fruitless attempts to hold an online election for the executive, during which several complained the system would not work, LDW eventually decided the two votes to block the constitutional amendment had to stand as valid and the elections would be re-run in January on the existing constitution with only those originally eligible allowed to vote. The outcome was pending as *Liberator* went to press.

JUST THE RIGHT PERSON

Someone with a sense of humour surely gave Lisa Smart the job of expressing the party's pleasure at the Government u-turn on digital ID cards.

The Hazel Grove MP said: “It was clear right from the start this was a proposal doomed to failure, that would have cost obscene amounts of taxpayers money to deliver absolutely nothing.”

This was at variance with Smart's attempts to get the Lib Dems to “rethink” policy on ID cards in September, a stance that led to an abrupt reverse ferret when Labour announced it wanted to impose the wretched things (*Liberator* 432).

Sticking with Smart's original proposal would have left the Lib Dems in the embarrassing position of being outflanked by Reform on civil liberty.

THE WAR DOWN THE ROAD FROM UKRAINE

Combat medic and conflict studies academic Adam McQuire has been taking aid to some of Ukraine's most dangerous places but finds doors shut when he tries to warn the UK government about modern warfare

When a Kinzhal ballistic missile lands locally, it is like the hammer of a god striking the earth.

There is no warning, there is no noise of its impending arrival, it just detonates. The blast wave hits first; it pops the ears and shakes the building. Then the audible explosion comes, with a crack and then a roar. A building, and those within it will, in an instant, have been turned to shards and vapour. They won't have been woken first, as most of these strikes come when you have dared to sleep. Then, life goes on.

Shaheds, you hear those coming, much like a cruel and uncaring moped screaming overhead. You have some time to react, counting the numbers of walls between you and the nearest window soon to become a swarm of blades moving inwards at the speed of sound, but you have some time. Then, life goes on.

KABs, the enormous glide bombs which Russia enjoys lobbing into city centres and power stations - you hear them fizz through the air but only if they are going to land behind you, and only just before they do. When they land, they level buildings, and they ignite everything around them. You are killed by the blast, or by the shrapnel, or you burn. Then, life goes on.

The cold hurts. Frigid, sub-arctic temperatures penetrate every home. The power is gone, it might come back, you heat what you can, you charge what can, the water stops as well. A chorus of generators provides a comforting white-noise, people queue around them to charge their phones to contact family and friends, to find out if the KABs, the Kinzhals, the Shaheds, the Iskanders, the Oreshnik, the Russians have killed them. An unconnected call or a single tick on a Whatsapp message rips out the soul. Then, life goes on.

FOUR TYPES OF PEOPLE

It appears to me that there are four types of people: Those who can't believe anything ever happens or ever will, those who don't care if it does, or don't think it's their job to, those who do – but have a tremendously stiff upper lip and believe that Britain will prevail because we saw off the Luftwaffe in good form and did rather well at Rorke's Drift, and those who do both care and worry, and of whom some will have seen modern, near-peer war and try to warn of it

Person 1 is a lost cause to person 4, as is person 2, while person 3 is too proud to talk to anyone. It's unclear which of the first three are in charge at any given time as they all present the same.

I, with my partner Dr Holly Tann, am a combat medic, a civilian tactical medical instructor, a founder

and director of Casus Pax, a visiting professor of conflict studies (scientific communications in Holly's case), and an executive fellow of ICMed. Since the outbreak of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine we have delivered more than 1,600,000 pieces of modern and complex medical equipment, over 250,000 pieces of chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear-suitable PPE, a fleet of 31 emergency vehicles and more than 400 computers, directly to front-line practitioners across every front-line region. We have worked for an aggregated 18 months in those front-line areas and have done so safely and effectively by partnering with universities, colleges, the National Police of Ukraine, and the State Emergency Services of Ukraine, among others. Our professionalism and

effectiveness have received endorsements of the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine, Ministry of Science and Education of Ukraine, and the Office of the President of Ukraine.

We have sat on regional committees with respect to humanitarian security and nuclear accident preparedness, and have relentlessly pushed to maintain international academic, emergency services and cultural cooperation and intellectual exchange, both to assist Ukraine, but also to prepare Britain.

We have intimate working knowledge of medical logistics, casualty continuum of care, infrastructure planning, and tactical and strategic threats, both civilian and military, as they pertain to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. None of which however are restricted to Ukraine solely, all of which will play out elsewhere.

We know where NATO and British military medical and evacuation doctrine is fundamentally insufficient and will fail, we know the challenges which will be faced by civil society if war arrives, and we know where there has been catastrophic corruption within the game of international aid.

Warfare has entered a new paradigm, where drones dominate, air superiority isn't contested, and most critically where the division between military and civilian is no more.

Person 1 doesn't believe it's happening, person 2 doesn't care, person 3 isn't worried.

An underground field hospital in which we have worked was recently destroyed by drones. They flew underground, through zig-zagging tunnels and defensive screens, and attempted to kill those within. When marked ambulances arrived to rescue what practitioners, casualties, and resources could be, those vehicles were also destroyed by more loitering drones.

This happens everywhere, all the time. This is illegal. Of course it is. But that simply doesn't matter.

We in the west, have for a very long time, assumed a degree of synonymity between the extant global order and the rule of law. This is naïve. international law is an illusion, it is theatre, while the global order changes on dime with an increasing capacity for devastation.

Person 1 doesn't believe it, person 2 doesn't care, person 3 isn't worried. I write as a person 4.

When war comes, it doesn't do so with trumpets sounding in advance of lumbering columns or armadas of warships, it just arrives. Missiles land; systems shatter and people die. An Oreshnik launched from Belarus has an 8ight minute flight time before it lands in the Home Counties, and there's nothing we can do about it. Modern and tremendously advanced logistics systems slam to a halt when the power goes out, casualties can't be extracted by conventional (to us) means if a drone is waiting to kill, and a land-war the size of Ukraine generates such a complex infection environment that antibiotic resistance will scar the medical world for a generation.

Person 1... etc.

Shortly before the new year, we were invited to brief senior military officials of the complexities of conflict medical practices and challenges in Ukraine, at the Belgian Military Academy in Brussels. If the Belgians have representatives of persons 1, 2 and 3, they weren't in the room.

The conversations we had were critical and several joint projects have been proposed. We hope to be able to continue to work with the Belgian Medical Component Command, their forward thinking and inclination towards interaction with civilian expertise and forward preparedness is deeply refreshing and encouraging. Yet when at home, we scream from the rooftops to relay our findings and intelligence to those in positions of authority. We are not on "the list"; we cannot penetrate the very deliberate and very deep moats which surround decision makers in the UK.

We have no one to speak to, no one to warn, no one to co-operate with.

We are not alone in this frustration. There are scores of civilian teams relentlessly sourcing, securing, fundraising for and delivering front-line, humanitarian services and materials in some of the most apocalyptic conditions one could imagine. There are even more working tirelessly to provide humanitarian support to the west of Ukraine. The lion's share of front-line humanitarian support is provided by the volunteer and self-mobilised.

Civilians are the great force multiplier in Ukraine; they have been fundamental to every civil and military success which Ukraine has enjoyed.

"When they land, they level buildings, and they ignite everything around them. You are killed by the blast, or by the shrapnel, or you burn. Then, life goes on"

This is well known there, their input isn't scorned and dismissed, its encouraged.

'UNAPPROVED' IRRITANTS

But our capacity to help stops at the border. As we cross back into the UK a remarkable transition happens. We go from professional medical support planners and humanitarian directors to 'unapproved', naïve and incompetent irritants, our information is worthless, we are mere civilian do-gooders.

Sadly, it seems our Ukrainian colleagues are often viewed the same, emails from staff officers,

university deans and generals go unanswered by their allies and counterparts in the UK. Sadly, rhetoric of "Just and Lasting..." doesn't actually do anything. They are fabulous mantras and certainly worthy of being used as such to direct functional and worthwhile endeavours, but they are cynical and hollow. The can, can only be kicked so far, eventually it becomes a land mine.

The UK has a fine tradition of standing up to totalitarianism. That ethos bleeds through the quagmire of non-committal condemnations and promises of serious considerations. I'd like to thank Lord Alton of Liverpool, city councillor Richard Kemp, and Liberator Collective member Kiron Reid. Their resolute support for Ukraine and our work has been essential as we grow both our scope and impact. There are others of course, who are equally dedicated to protecting Ukraine's and Europe's sovereignty and safety, it is broader policy which is a trickier and more ambivalent beast.

We will depart for Ukraine again soon. Key objectives of our next deployment are: the delivery of modern and complex medical equipment, the delivery of at least five vehicles for evacuation purposes, the delivery of civilian tactical medical training to education staff at schools and colleges; institutions at risk of occupation, which have already been hit with substantial damage, and which shall undoubtedly be again, and the construction of an underground hospital. There is no such thing as an insignificant donation. Significant ones are also welcomed.

The lessons learned in Ukraine have been paid for in blood. We run the risk of paying the same price because persons 1, 2 and 3 will not talk to person 4.

Adam McQuire is founder and director of Casus Pax

1,000 DAYS, AND THE BLOOD CAN BE SEEN FROM SPACE

Sudan is the world's worst - and most ignored - human rights crisis and is being stoked but the Gulf states and others with the own interests says Rebecca Tinsley

As Sudan marks 1,000 days of war, both armies are now targeting Black Africans and religious minorities. Sudan is the world's largest humanitarian crisis by far, yet a lack of concerted diplomatic engagement means there is no end to the suffering of Sudanese civilians in sight.

In October, 500 days of siege ended when the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) captured El Fasher in Darfur from the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). The army showed little interest in defending civilians, leaving the RSF to slaughter at least 10,000. The bloodstained ground was visible from space.

The battlefield has shifted from Darfur in the west to the Kordofan region where a Black African Christian majority is under drone attack. On Christmas Day, 12 worshippers were killed and 19 wounded when their church in Julul was attacked. The United Nations International Organization for Migration believes 67,000 people in Kordofan have fled the violence in recent weeks. This adds to the estimated one million IDPs already in the area.

The main Kordofan towns of El Obeid, Dilling and

Kadugli are the scene of intense fighting, subject to blockades preventing food and medicine entering. Analysts fear a repeat of the siege of El Fasher. In December, the UN's early warning committee highlighted the dangers facing the vast Kordofan region.

SLAVE TRADERS

Ethnic Black African and Christian minorities in the Kordofan states, which includes the Nuba Mountains, have been the subject of aerial attacks by the Islamist Sudanese regime in Khartoum since the 1980s. For centuries before, Arab slave traders raided the area repeatedly. When he served in Sudan, Winston Churchill witnessed Arabs from Khartoum spending weekends hunting the Nuba people, who are ethnically Black African, using them as target practice. This is the same strikingly tall and dark-skinned ethnic group filmed by Leni Riefenstahl. Although some are Muslim, many are Christian or animist.

Field Marshall Bashir's military dictatorship (which self-identified as Arab and Muslim, despite centuries of inter-marriage in Sudan) amended the penal code to include crucifixion in 1991. As recently as 2024, three men were crucified by the SAF for allegedly collaborating with their enemies in the rebel RSF. Human rights groups say churches have been subject to harassment, closure and destruction by the Khartoum regime for decades.

An estimated two million Black African Sudanese died in the long-running struggle to gain South Sudan's



independence in 2011 which was fought along largely ethnic lines. The diplomats negotiating the end of the fighting failed to include the Nuba Mountains or Blue Nile area in the new country, consigning the Black African population remaining in Sudan to years of persecution and bombing by Bashir's dictatorship.

Until recently, the SAF and RSF acted together in a campaign of ethnic persecution against the Black African population of Darfur, killing at least 300,000 during the first Darfur genocide of 2003-06. Following a popular civilian uprising in 2019, the SAF and RSF together overthrew a transitional non-sectarian civilian government in 2021.

However, in April 2023, the two militias turned on each other, fighting for control of Sudan's abundant natural resources, including gold. The RSF has now forced the SAF out of most of Darfur, with a massive loss of civilian life, destruction, human rights abuses, targeted violence against women and girls, and displacement, including what the United States recognises as a genocide.

A new report containing dozens of interviews with survivors of the recent conflict in Darfur has been compiled by two British human rights volunteers, Marcus and Tomas Ray. The survivors, now in refugee camps in neighbouring Chad, give accounts of sexual violence against women and boys, enslavement, mass killing, desecration of bodies and racial abuse. The Ray brothers' report is dedicated to the late Earl of Sandwich in recognition of his lifelong work for human rights in Sudan. Witness testimony about mass executions in Darfur has been validated by the Yale Humanitarian Research Lab.

Human rights groups estimate that at least 150,000 have been killed since the war began 1,000 days ago. They cite several reasons for an absence of international pressure, including the focus on Ukraine and Gaza. There has also been a lack of coordinated diplomatic action to halt the fighting, with competing initiatives failing to bring consensus.

For instance, the UK hosted a conference on the war in April 2025 without inviting any Sudanese to attend. The meeting achieved nothing.

Most consequential however are the geopolitical interests in play which threaten to spread anarchy across a much wider region of East Africa. The UN has compiled evidence that the United Arab Emirates (UAE) continues to supply the RSF with weapons and assistance. Supporting the SAF are Egypt, Iran and Saudi Arabia, none of whom wish to see a democratic, civilian-run government succeed in a Muslim-majority country.

“As recently as 2024, three men were crucified by the army for allegedly collaborating with their enemies”

PROXY WAR

Analysts say Saudi Arabia and the UAE are engaged in a proxy war, similar to their engagement in Yemen, trying to extend their influence in Africa. Nations such as the UK and USA, with close business relationships with the Gulf powers, have declined to apply concerted diplomatic pressure on Gulf rulers to curb their support for the warring parties. For instance, the

UAE owns more real estate in London than the Duke of Westminster. London banks launder Emirati money, and the UAE has bought Manchester City. In addition, the UK sells the UAE weapons.

The UK's Foreign Office regularly “urges all sides to abide by international humanitarian law,” but in the absence of concerted pressure, such as targeted smart personal sanctions on complicit Emirati or Saudi individuals, its words are disregarded as meaningless by those sustaining the fighting.

Meanwhile, civilian groups within Sudan provide humanitarian support to embattled communities. The Emergency Response Rooms (ERR), a network of hundreds of soup kitchens and ad hoc medical facilities across the country, were nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Human rights groups say the ERR volunteers are deliberately targeted by both sides. They continue their work in the absence of services for civilians from the SAF, which nevertheless maintains that it is the government, or the RSF which occupies much of Darfur. Although the UK Foreign Office boasts that it supports the big aid agencies working in refugee camps in Chad, it declines to send money electronically to the ERRs where it would have the maximum impact.

The SAF is increasingly regarded by the international community, including the African Union, as the government of Sudan. This normalisation offers the guise of legitimacy to one of the forces responsible for overthrowing the transitional civilian government in 2021. Analysts point out that the SAF is made up of the same extremist Islamist ideologues who ran Sudan for decades during Field Marshall Bashir's dictatorship. Bashir was indicted for genocide by the International Criminal Court. Moreover, the SAF has had close ties to Iran and Russia, promising military bases on the Red Sea until last month.

The prospect of Putin having a naval base on the Red Sea should concentrate diplomatic attention on stopping the war and ensuring a transition to a non-sectarian, broadly representative civilian administration in Sudan, but evidently keeping in with Gulf autocrats takes priority.

Rebecca Tinsley is the founder of the human rights group www.WagingPeace.info

FIGHTING BACK IN A LIBERAL CITY

London ought to be a Lib Dem stronghold but the Coalition and the electoral pattern have held the party back. Will it change in May asks Rob Blackie

Why aren't there more Lib Dems in London? And will that change in 2026?

After all, London is the world's most liberal great city. Londoners are liberal. Yet less than one in 10 of our MPs are in London, we run just three of London's councils, and we hold less than one in 10 council seats.

The answer results from the unusual political setup of London, and the damage done by the Coalition.

Before 2010 we were a significant force in London, with councillors in most boroughs. As recently as 2006 we ran inner London councils such as Brent, Islington, Camden, Lambeth and Southwark, as well as our long term strongpoints of Sutton, Kingston and Richmond.

Yet the Coalition almost wiped us out in the London 2014 elections, and we were locked out of many councils. We ended up with barely 100 councillors, one-third of our 2006 peak. These were almost entirely in areas which had Lib Dem MPs before 2015.

ODD PATTERN

Of course this dynamic will be familiar to readers from around the UK. But London's odd pattern of local elections will not. London wards are typically large (often 10,000 people), with high population turnover, and are elected all-up every four years. And most of London is Labour facing - creating

more problems for us when our party brand was so damaged by the Coalition.

Add this together and it's been startlingly hard to bounce back in the last ten years.

Once locked out of a council, local parties had the challenge of how to regain a foothold. Without a councillor to focus on, it can be hard to agree on a consistent targeting strategy. Large wards, with

mobile populations, require an ongoing canvassing effort over many years. Many people live in hard to access flats and converted houses. And activists move around a lot too. Even the hardest working teams can struggle in this environment.

The result was that in 2018 we struggled to regain a foothold in most of these black holes. Those areas where we started with even one councillor had a significantly better performance. In Camden we bounced back in 2018, and have continued to grow through a series of by-election victories. And most spectacularly in Merton, we laid the grounds for future victory in the seat of Wimbledon, starting with one councillor in 2014, we bounced back in 2018, and continue to grow.

In 2022 this pattern was repeated, with growth in areas where we had councillors,

but not enough breakthroughs. Notably several of the councils where we did regain councillors (Brent and Lambeth) were building on hard fought by-election campaigns in these wards between the 2018 and 2022 elections.



It's been a tough 15 years for London Lib Dem activists. Plenty of people who would have won in other parts of Britain have seen defeat after defeat. More than one friend of mine has moved from losing council elections in London, to becoming an MP or councillor outside London.

However there are signs that the tide is turning.

In 2019 we won the European elections in London [<https://www.onlondon.co.uk/european-elections-2019-the-big-swings-and-subtler-shifts-within-londons-weird-looking-borough-results-map/>] - showing that there are liberal voters across the capital. In a swath of boroughs where we found we had voters, even where we didn't have councillors. In the 2024 mayoral election we achieved our best result in 16 years, based on clear messaging about crime, Europe and the environment, as well as winning our first ever constituency seat on the London Assembly. And in July 2024 we regained both MPs in Sutton.

This year we face the biggest opportunity for at least 20 years.

Londoners are disappointed in Labour's national failures, and the Conservatives' decline has fed through into London. And locally many Labour councils have performed badly.

For instance Lambeth which has managed to overspend by £60m this year, and whose failed housing company has cost local residents £500 each. The popular event Lambeth Country Show (look it up for incredible pictures of sculptures made of vegetables alongside reggae and sheepshearing) has been cancelled, and housing repairs are among the worst in the country.

Our national messages fit well with London's needs. Londoners want the government to fix Brexit, provide cleaner rivers, and to fight Reform's poisonous ideology. We haven't cut through as much as we'd like, but we've made solid progress in recent months.

The rise of Reform, and the Greens, has though made the London-wide picture considerably more complicated than before, so predicting what will happen next year is even more difficult than usual.

In our MPs' backyards we can expect to perform well, based on competent Lib Dem local councils and hard working local MPs. While in inner London, residents constantly complain about their Labour councils, in areas such as Sutton it's common to hear the council complemented for its efficiency.

Sutton council will have something for everybody on election night, with fights against every party imaginable in different parts that range from poorer inner suburbs to wealthy Surrey borders. Merton is our top target for a council gain in London - with many opportunities to gain in Paul Kohler's Wimbledon constituency and nearby.

Across the rest of London there are two distinct patterns. In some areas, such as Bromley and most of Ealing, we have clear opportunities to gain against a rudderless and increasingly extreme Conservative

"Londoners want the government to fix Brexit, provide cleaner rivers, and to fight Reform's poisonous ideology"

party. While Reform are on the rise, they are rarely a threat to our council candidates. In fact our principled stance on Reform, in contrast to Labour and the Conservatives pandering, is winning us a significant chunk of voters who previously hadn't considered us.

STAG BEETLES

In the rest of London we have seen the Labour vote evaporate in recent months, with committed Labour

voters rarer than stag beetles. On the doorsteps, from Hackney and Lambeth to Southwark and Camden, I've lost track of the number of conversations where somebody says: "Last year I voted Labour, but I'm not doing that again."

Labour is usually helped in London by a vast activist base, derived from a large membership. And their base of more than 1,000 councillors has often helped them to crush Liberal Democrat teams trying to break through.

But just as their vote has evaporated, so has their activist base. And Labour councillors are resigning, joining other parties, or simply retiring in droves. Council group leaders have retreated to safer seats in Camden and Lambeth. Meanwhile in Lambeth a former Labour mayor has joined the Lib Dems.

And Labour is now fighting on many distinct fronts; Against Reform in the outer suburbs in places like Barnet; against the far left in patches of the inner city including parts of Keir Starmer's constituency; against the Greens in the youngest parts of London like Hackney; And Labour are fighting the bizarre Aspire party in Tower Hamlets, headed by Lutfur Rahman, a former Labour councillor who was removed from office in 2015 after an election court found him guilty of "corrupt or illegal practices".

And we Liberal Democrats are being more ambitious against Labour than we've been in 15 years. In areas such as Waltham Forest, Islington and Hackney we are fighting hard for a breakthrough - which would re-establish us in those parts of east and north-east London.

While in Brent, Southwark and Lambeth we are aiming for the best result in 20 years - taking us back closer to the post-Iraq war era of success. In each of these boroughs Labour is on the back foot - with prominent defections to both us and the Greens, financial problems, waste and a sense that Labour have become complacent.

In an election where parties could win or lose on not much more than 30% of the vote, we are fighting with everything we have going into May. A fragmented electorate makes it impossible to make any solid predictions - but we're pushing out into areas we haven't campaigned in years. There's all to play for.

Rob Blackie was the Liberal Democrat candidate for London mayor in 2024. He is pictured debating with mayor Sir Sadiq Khan

MAKE OR BREAK IN WALES

Peter Black looks at Liberal Democrat prospects under Wales' new PR system for Senedd elections

It is no exaggeration to say that 2026 will be a crunch year for the Welsh Liberal Democrats, and one of fundamental change for Wales.

One reason for that change is the wholesale reform of the Senedd's election. Instead of 60 members, on 7 May we will elect 96, six in each of 16 constituencies.

And in place of the 40 first-past-the-post constituency members and 20 regional top-up members, there will be closed party lists, with seats distributed by a straightforward d'Hondt proportional representation system.

The reality is that the Senedd's composition will be more proportional but smaller parties will find it harder to claim seats. We estimate that a party or an individual will need at least 12% in a constituency to win one seat.

It will also prove very difficult for any party to win a majority of seats. Post-election deals will be essential to get stable government. It is possible that even a coalition would fall short of a majority.

This is not a system that the Welsh Liberal Democrats wanted - party policy favours an 80 member Senedd elected by STV. Nevertheless, this is the system we are presented with.

The polls are not our friend, but what they show is sensational by any stretch of the imagination.

Labour have dominated Welsh politics for over a century. They have led every government since the Senedd was constituted in 1999, and at the last UK general election they won 27 of 32 seats up for grabs here.

The last opinion poll of 2027, conducted by YouGov, put Labour on just 10% of the vote. The Tories were also polling 10%, the Greens 9%. the Welsh Liberal Democrats were on 6% and Others on 2%. Reform was at 30% and Plaid Cymru 33%.

This poll is not an outlier. The Labour vote has been eroding steadily throughout 2025, while Plaid Cymru and Reform have been battling it out for top spot. The Caerphilly by-election saw Nigel Farage's party fall back slightly, while the nationalists have opened up a small lead.

How this plays out is a matter for conjecture. It will depend not just on turnout but comparative turnout. Can Reform get all its support registered and to the polls? They struggled in the by-election and their recent all-Wales mailing to every voter received a mixed response.

Farage is certainly going to try. He has said his party will spend £5m in an effort to consolidate and grow support. I suspect a large proportion will be spent in Wales, where Reform believe that they can achieve largest party status.

By-elections are renowned for moving the electoral needle, often in the Liberal Democrats' favour. The Caerphilly contest did that too, but in another direction.

Plaid Cymru managed to marshal an anti-Reform vote in support of a popular local candidate, using a classic two-party squeeze to win.

It was that result that cemented their place as front-runners to form the next Welsh Government and pushed Labour even further behind.

Those tactics will not though, be available in the Welsh general election, where the number of votes gained will by and large transfer into a similar share of seats. This means that the smaller parties, including the Welsh Liberal Democrats, have a chance of taking some seats and even forming part of a subsequent Plaid-led administration.

As will be familiar to Liberal Democrat activists everywhere, we will focus on areas where we have strength on the ground in the hope that grassroots activity, combined with work to identify and get out our vote, can push us over the threshold to gain seats.

We believe we can win seats in constituencies covering Powys, Cardiff, Swansea and Ceredigion, and possibly north Wales. Often, we will be competing for the sixth seat in a constituency with the Greens and with Reform, who will be hoping to add to those they have already gained at the top of the distribution.

It is crucial that we raise enough money to compete in those constituencies, that we adopt distinctive, liberal policies and that we continue to get out onto doorsteps to talk to voters, backed up by regular, high-quality literature.

The Welsh Liberal Democrats remain weak in many parts of Wales. We are still struggling to recover from the UK coalition. But we are on the way back in a difficult seven party system and I am confident that in the next Senedd we will be standing up once more for the liberal causes and policies that distinguish us from the other parties.

Winning Brecon and Radnorshire in 2024, albeit on an enlarged footprint, was a big deal, and David Chadwick has proven an effective and well-respected voice at Westminster and in the Welsh media.

Our job now is to add to our single seat in the Senedd and put together a strong group.

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

NOT BACK TO THE FUTURE

Nigel Lindsay fears the chance has gone in May to resurrect the Labour-Lib Dem coalition that once ruled Scotland

It would take a courageous commentator to make firm predictions about the May 2026 elections to the Scottish Parliament.

Last October, a survey for The (Glasgow) Herald suggested the SNP would remain the largest party with 55 out of the 129 seats. Reform would be second with 22, Labour just behind with 19, and the Conservatives, Lib Dems and Greens would win 12, 11, and 10 seats respectively.

An Ipsos poll from early December predicted that the SNP would win 60 seats, Labour 19, the Greens and Reform 17 each, the Conservatives 11, and the Lib Dems just five seats.

To add to the confusion, a poll at the turn of the year led Professor John Curtice to suggest an outcome of 59 seats for the SNP, 25 for Reform, 13 for the Greens, 12 each for Labour and the Conservatives, and eight for the Lib Dems.

It's worth remembering that the near-proportional voting system for the parliament provides for 73 seats on a first-past-the-post basis. It then adds 56 MSPs from party lists, chosen by an elector's second vote. In this way, the overall composition of the parliament roughly reflects the Scotland-wide strength of all parties that gain more than 5% of the vote. So, even if Reform wins no seats outright but gains 20% of the vote throughout the country, it may end up with about 15-20 seats. A good Lib Dem showing in the 'second votes' could lead to the party picking up as many as 12 or 13 seats. Conversely, if Lib Dems fail to reach the 5% threshold they will end up with only those seats they can win outright: maybe four, possibly six.

The outcome will depend on how voters' decisions crystallise over the first four months of the year. To form a government, a party or coalition needs to win 65 seats or more. For some time it was the unspoken hope of Lib Dems and Labour to re-create the coalition between the two parties which formed successful governments between 1999 and 2007. While that seemed optimistically possible in 2024, it now looks miserably unlikely. Why have things changed so much?

Labour leader Anas Sarwar, a competent if uninspiring man, has seen his hopes fade as a result of the 'Starmer Effect'. As the UK Government struggles to meet the hopes of those who elected it, Labour support, so buoyant in 2024, has ebbed away. With it has gone the dream of a Lib-Lab coalition.

Reform gained its first council seat through election (as opposed to defection) at the end of 2025 in a drab part of a drab county. A journalist conducted an intriguing survey by asking Reform voters why they voted as they did, and found the most common phrase used was 'fed up'. Not that they were all fed up with the same things, but it was clear there was much to be fed up about.

The valiant Lib Dem candidate came fifth, with less than 3% of the vote. Sadly, the Reform win overshadowed a fine Lib Dem victory in a Highland seat on the same day.

It's evident from results like this that Lib Dems have very little appeal in drab, post-industrial small towns. This matters enormously, because overcoming the 5% threshold will not be achieved in areas where we are consistently polling around 3%. Where we fail to overcome that threshold, the party will not gain the 'list' seats which are the route to real parliamentary strength.

Over recent years Lib Dems have joined with the Labour and Conservative parties in frontal attacks on the SNP. Much of the criticism has been deserved. The SNP's failure to manage the ferry system which is a vital part of Scotland's infrastructure has been appalling. The vast new Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Glasgow has failed in several ways. The Scottish Government's record in tackling drug-related deaths is shameful.

But the SNP's record is not all bad. Strikes by junior doctors have been largely averted in Scotland by better government management. Scotland levies income tax in a slightly more progressive way than England, and there are still no tuition fees for Scottish students studying at Scottish universities. The SNP is in broad terms a social democratic party. It combines that with a commitment to independence which remains popular, and it attracts support from voters who feel let down by London-based parties.

The danger created by constant attacks on the SNP is that 'fed up' voters will be persuaded to leave the SNP, but desert to Reform. Those attacks by establishment parties may therefore have unintended consequences.

Surveys suggest that the next Scottish Government will be led by the SNP, possibly with formal or informal support from the Greens or, by a stretch of political imagination, from Lib Dems. Reform might lead the opposition. However, that fails to allow for the tendency of voters to return to traditional allegiances as elections approach, and for the ability of Scottish voters to identify and deride charlatans when they see them.

Nigel Lindsay has been active in Liberal politics in Scotland for 60 years. He co-edited *The Little Yellow Book* and *Unlocking Liberalism for Liberal Futures*.

BEWARE OF GREENS BEARING GIFTS

The Liberal Democrats are more progressive than the Greens, says Rob Heale, based on his experience of being locally ruled by them

The Green Party was created from the remnants of the Ecology Party. At that point, conspiracy theorist David Icke was leader (or 'principal speaker') and Caroline Lucas was chair of the national Green Party.

They did well in the European Elections in 1989, gaining 15% of the vote, often campaigning on an anti-EU message. Icke was often used for media interviews to promote the party. Some people might remember his interview on the Terry Wogan Show when he made bizarre comments including that he was "the son of the godhead" and that people "should wear turquoise clothing for salvation" He was later removed from the party

Others might remember that the Green party national conference voted to cut the population of this country by 20%. How they intended to do that was unclear, though the Nazi-type comparisons were there for all to see. The party still has its share of 'de-populators', which is concerning from a Liberal point of view.

POPULIST PARTY

The Greens often appear to be a populist party that changes its mind depending on what might be popular at the time. Anti-EU, then pro-EU, anti-NATO, then mainly NAT.O sceptic; often anti-HS2; frequently in favour of a separate Scotland and Wales, policies that most Liberal Democrats are in disagreement with for security, environmental, economic, social justice and internationalist reasons.

There is also a danger of a cult of personality which we can see with the hype about their new leader Zack Polanski. The "eco-populism" promoted by the Greens could easily end up becoming more like an authoritarian form of 'eco-fascism'.

The Greens have controlled Brighton and Hove City Council twice, once for four years and then later for a period of two-to-three years. On both occasions they became very unpopular, were voted out and lost many council seats. There are two universities in the area (mainly in Brighton Pavilion) and the turnover of voters can be considerable.

There have been many local controversies about the Greens during their spells in power. Only 30% of the city's waste is recycled compared with an average of 45% for English local Councils. Under the first Green administration, the recycling rate actually fell. The Greens have also been opposed to park and ride schemes or decades and have often tried to frustrate attempts to create them or scare mongered about the possible sites.

Brighton and Hove is an historic area but the Greens don't seem to have had much respect for our heritage. We ave seen the destruction of part of the Grade Listed West Pier Arches as part of the controversial loss making i360 development (pictured), which owed the council £51m by 2024, and the continued neglect of the Madeira Arches and Terraces in Kemptown, which is where London to Brighton events often finish and other public events are held. These are now being partly restored under a Labour council, the Greens having lost 13 council seats in 2023.

Greens presided over big housing waiting lists (for individuals and households) and failed to build or renovate for affordable/social rent homes. People were often put into inadequate temporary accommodation. Many of the supposed 'new units' they said had been created were actually just small flats, studio flats or even bedsits. They also failed to co-operate fully with housing associations, co-ops and self-builders to help bridge the housing gap.

The biggest drain on resources has been the i360 which cost £40.2m to build (and a further £6m put in privately) and made huge losses.

This followed secretive meetings, alleged skullduggery and complex funding arrangements that resulted from a flawed business model under the Green party administration. This public funding and the losses could have been spent on essential services. The current Labour council report i360 owed a massive £51m and that amount could be even higher There will be an independent investigation.

Other money was wasted on parking schemes and on new 'bespoke' street drains that don't actually drain into the sewage system, are too small and are just holes in the ground that get blocked up, stink and cause localised flooding.

One of the reasons that the Greens lost 13 seats here in 2023 was the general environmental neglect of the area, including weeds growing on pavements, in street drains, gullies, verges and elsewhere; graffiti (sometimes offensive) seen to be out of control; dereliction; empty shops and other problems, which the new council have attempted to tackle.

There was a general feeling of neglect in many parts of the city which affected residents and visitors.

The strategy of the Greens seemed to be based on their regional structure, with money and human resources concentrated through these into a small number of target seats. For example, in the south-east of England, their regional headquarters (based in my ward in Brighton) concentrated most of their resources on Brighton Pavilion. Here, according to Parliamentary records and the local press, the Greens

had £259,000 to spend in the months leading up to the general election, most of it probably in the six months prior to 4 July. A secondary target was Hastings, though they were a disappointing third there.

Zoe Nicholson of the Green Party stated in the Bright Green magazine this year that the Greens need at least £250,000 to win parliamentary seats and they concentrate on the 'long campaign' leading up to the general election campaign.

In the south of England, their target was the new Isle of Wight West seat where they were also a disappointing third, with the Liberal Democrats doing reasonably well in the East Isle of Wight seat and holding their own in the West seat.

For the East of England, the Greens concentrated on Waveney Valley, a Tory seat where their candidate was then co-leader Adrian Ramsey. Parliamentary records reveal that he also had many private donations, including one to form a new regional office in this seat. He won this, though the Greens might struggle to hold on because they have lost a reasonably safe council seats with a big swing to the Tories.

Many resources in the West of England were also put into the Bristol seat of the other then co-leader Carla Denyer. Here, the private donations and expenditure was also high, though she had the benefit of national publicity and some local controversies about the Labour council and mayoralty.

In the Midlands, the Greens put more resources into the Herefordshire seat, which was won from the Tories. There were also some local issues here though the candidate, according to the official figures, appears to have spent much less than the other three MP's to get elected. In the north of England Greens failed to get near winning a seat, while in Scotland and Wales they were some way from winning anything.

Overall, the Greens had more candidates in the general election than ever before, more financial resources, a reasonably strong regional structure and concentrated their resources on 4-6 seats. They also attempted to take over in constituencies where Lib Dems were weakened after the 2015 general election.

POLICY CONFLICTS

Greens have a number of policy conflicts and contradictions on environment versus new housing; environment versus civil rights; nationalism versus internationalism and stances on the Middle East versus human rights and equalities.

One example is their stance on a separate Wales and Scotland. They want independence for populist reasons and were recently in coalition with the SNP in Scotland, while taking part in talks about an independent Wales with Plaid Cymru. Polanski has confirmed the support for this policy.

Another is their populist stance on Middle East affairs, where they sometimes support groups that seem to have little interest in human rights issues or equality of opportunities for women and for minority

"One of the reasons that the Greens lost 13 seats here in 2023 was the general environmental neglect of the area"

groups. Some of their parliamentary candidates in 2024 were exposed as having sympathised with views that are conspiratorial and some were allegedly suspended by the party just before the general election.

What are the lessons for Liberal Democrats?

• Think carefully before co-operating with the Greens. They might just nick your tactics, copy some of your ideas, steal some votes and undermine you.

• Co-operate on specific issues and don't form electoral pacts with them. In many seats where we let Greens stand in the past, local parties have suffered due to the lack of campaign activity and disagreements about those electoral pacts. We can co-operate with them on issues of wealth taxes.

• We need to have more of an urban perspective in our national policies and our local campaigning.

• There needs to be more emphasis on issues such as building affordable and social rent homes; ending the feudal-based long leasehold system of housing - affecting 5.0m people in England and Wales - tackling NHS waiting lists; and practical environmental policies that benefit urban areas.

• We must remember our Liberal and Liberal Democrat values including support for mutual societies, co-operatives, social enterprises and employee share ownership. Our values include social justice, civil rights, equal opportunities and practical environmental action.

• Liberal Democrats must prioritise membership, both nationally and through local parties.

The party must put more resources into urban areas to gain a higher national vote, to reach more people with the Liberal Democrat message and those seats might include Portsmouth South, parts of Birmingham, Bristol, Exeter, Edinburgh, Cardiff, Hull, Manchester, Newcastle, Liverpool, Southwark and Sunderland.

If we are to make further progress, we need better regional organisation and resources. We need to be more active in those areas and attract additional members and supporters, particularly from a working class background.

In 2024 it was a highly targeted campaign for the opposition parties. Those progressives who were incumbents or in second place often benefited from the anti-Tory sentiment. We have gained 72 parliamentary seats, a great achievement, now we should aim for 100 MP's and a higher national vote. To do that we must out-maneuvre the Greens, stress our historic Liberal values and focus on issues such as health and housing.

Rob Heale is a member of Brighton Pavilion Liberal Democrats

JUSTICE DENIED BY BUDGET CUTS

David Lammy's assault on the vital constitutional safeguard of jury trials must be stopped, says Alistair Webster KC

There is a serious and obvious crisis in the criminal justice system. The number of cases waiting to be heard in the crown court has reached 80,000. Trials are already being fixed well into 2029. This is, obviously, completely unacceptable.

The right to a fair trial within a reasonable period is enshrined in Article 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), but the need for justice without delay was enshrined 811 years ago in Magna Carta.

Of course, 80,000 does not just involve 80,000 defendants and their families, but 80,000 victims awaiting justice.

And now we have the Lord Chancellor, David Lammy, proposing to do away with the vast majority of jury trials (those where the sentence is likely to be less than three years), allegedly to tackle the backlog.

He is adopting some recommendations made by Sir Brian Leveson, long a supporter of reducing jury trials (perhaps why he was appointed to report).

Apart from restricting jury trials, he also proposes to reduce the right to appeal against magistrates' decisions. A double whammy.

So, is there a connection between the backlog and jury trials? It is impossible to rule out the fact that jury trials might have some marginal impact, but there is a far more telling picture

While spending on all Government departments is forecast to increase this year by some 40% against its 2005 level, spending on justice fell sharply between 2015 and 2025 and is forecast only to return this year to its 2005 level.

COALITION CUTS

It is sad to report that the biggest cuts in funding came under the coalition. The party's policy on access to justice was well defined – I introduced it at conference and, when the coalition government ignored it, it was reaffirmed by conference by an overwhelming majority – but it was still ignored. This was during the disastrous period when the appalling 'Failing Grayling' headed the Ministry of Justice (MoJ).

The party must acknowledge that it did not do enough to protect the justice system and must learn lessons from that failure.

So, the picture is clear: the backlog has built while the system has been starved of funding – a policy of malign neglect.

What are the causes? Of course, Covid-19 had an effect. The withdrawal of labour by the Bar – something which barristers were very reluctant to do – also had its effect, but the reality is that these were not the main contributors. Over the past decade underfunding means that:

- Court staff levels have been significantly reduced, and experienced staff have left;
- The criminal bar has shrunk because of poor pay and stressful conditions;
- There have been periodic reductions in sitting days;
- Defendants are regularly produced late at court by the prison system;
- Courtrooms have been left empty and court estate has been sold off;
- Crown Prosecution Service and defence solicitors have excessive workloads and so case preparation regularly fails to meet what is required. This means that trials have to be adjourned.

The nett effect of the delays is that victims and suspects have to wait for protracted periods for cases to be resolved. The weight of this upon individual lives cannot be underestimated. And nor, importantly, can the effect on public confidence in the system.

Is jury trial important? It has been viewed as the bulwark of civil liberties against the state for many years and is seen by many as a basic right under our constitution.

But Leveson disagreed: "...There exists no such constitutional or common law right to a trial by jury with the result that there is no basis for this to limit any approach to necessary reform."

His view runs contrary to that of many eminent jurists. Lord Camden called it: "The foundation of our free constitution." Lord Eldon: "The greatest blessing which the British Constitution had secured to the subject." Sir William Blackstone: "These inroads [to trial by jury] upon this sacred bulwark of the nation are fundamentally opposed to the spirit of our constitution; and that, begun in trifles, the precedent may gradually increase and spread, to the utter disuse of juries in questions of the most momentous concern."

Many similar views can be found over the centuries and I suggest that Leveson is wrong, and dangerously wrong, in his view. Judgment by one's peers seems to be an important component of our national view of justice.

Other arguments have been advanced over the years to the effect that jury trials are inefficient or that juries do not understand the issues.

No system is perfect, but it is my experience, having been involved in jury trials for nearly half a century, that verdicts are very rarely ones without a basis which can be understood. In the words of Lady Justice Hallett: "Critics of juries in long fraud trials blame the collapse of some high-profile trials on the jury system. Yet, if you analyse what went wrong, the fault

for most part seems to have lain not with the jurors but elsewhere.”

It is an inescapable fact that there is a tendency for judges to become case hardened, even when they try (as they do) to avoid it. Some have been notoriously pro-prosecution. The jury acts as a failsafe.

Do the judges want to take on this role? In practical terms, it adds a significant burden to their already burdened professional lives. The requirement to set out reasoned judgments will add significantly to their burden. But it is also inevitable that their reasoning will be attacked, both through the appeals process and in the media.

In an interview in The Times on 19/12/2025, the Lady Chief Justice pointed out recurrent threats to the security of judges. She described judicial confidence as fragile. This is not conducive to embracing the task of acting as judge and jury in important cases.

SLIPPERY SLOPE

Any deprivation of liberty is a very serious interference with personal liberty and the consequences for the individual involved can be catastrophic. Three years is a significant sentence. Why is it an appropriate cut-off point? Why not five, or 10? Like all such decisions, once the slippery slope is embarked upon, there will always be some apparently compelling bureaucratic reason to alter the cut-off point.

Principles have to be defended.

Importantly, whilst talking of the causes of the current state of the criminal justice system, the Lady Chief Justice said, “If you decide to keep justice at the bottom of the financial ladder – and it’s not any particular government; it’s decades of under-resourcing – then those political decisions have put us where we are.”

She went on to identify many of the things which those working in the system will recognise: “If you continue to under-resource, you’ll continue to have problems with later delivery of prisoners, finding barristers, insufficient courtrooms up and running for judges to sit in. You can throw your hands up in horror, rightly so, because it’s dreadful for all concerned, for the rule of law, for individuals, for the economy. But you can’t do that and say, how is this happening? If that’s where society places the justice system, that will be the consequence.”

So, any suggestion that the backlog and the

“The party must acknowledge that it did not do enough to protect the justice system and must learn lessons from that failure”

inefficiencies in the criminal justice system can be laid at the door of jury trials does not correspond with reality, and Lammy’s proposals will, at best, have a marginal effect on the backlog, but at a huge cost: loss, for many, of a constitutional safeguard; extra costs in terms of more judges needed; more court days required; more prison spaces; higher fees to lawyers (the recruitment and retention of criminal advocates is already a major problem following huge decreases in real fee

levels). There is already an issue in attracting suitable candidates for judicial appointment.

It will be apparent from the list of extra costs that the expense involved will be required independent of the Lammy proposals. So why make them in the first place? Is it in the hope of doing something, anything, while appeasing the Treasury, whose dead hand is all over these proposals?

This should be something which is above party politics. It relates to who we are as a nation. It relates to what value we give to issues as fundamental to our system as trial by jury.

The nation state obtained its legitimacy from providing peace and secure borders, and the provision of a justice system, equal and accessible to all, was fundamental to that legitimacy. The devaluing of the judicial system

by politicians, to which our party contributed its own unhappy small part, has to stop.

We need, as a party, not only oppose these proposals, but also to campaign for the means to make good the system before it falls into even worse disrepair. If the system performs badly, it loses its legitimacy and the public confidence which is so necessary to its effective functioning. We ought to be seeking a cross-party coalition to speak up for justice. Before it’s too late.

And these dire proposals need to be defeated. Lammy threatens to be Grayling Mark 2.

It’s notable that his only proposal to release the MoJ’s modelling, when questioned by the Select Committee, was “I will do what I deem appropriate for the purposes of ensuring this Bill’s passing.” What a statement from the Lord Chancellor of England and Wales! He must be stopped.

Alistair Webster KC is a member of Rights, Liberties Justice, the Liberal Democrat Lawyers’ Association



STRONGER THAN WE THINK

Right wing populists need not have things their way if a liberal majority can be mobilised, says William Lane

It's a strange time to be a liberal. On the one hand, we watch in horror as a resurgent far right plants its flag in western democracies, sowing our societies with hatred and bigotry. They make hay turning father against son, mother against daughter, and find easy scapegoats in immigrants, ethnic minorities and LGBTQ people.

They transform complex social problems into witch hunts, ever seeking new enemies to blame for events and changes they themselves barely comprehend. Given that parties espousing these ideas are now topping the polls across Europe, it would be understandable if liberals were in utter despair at the state of liberal democracy across the globe.

So why do I sense a renewed vitality, indeed even optimism, among liberals as we enter 2026? Partly this has to do with the ongoing fallout of Trump 2.0, as the façade of an all powerful populist leader falls away into domestic unpopularity, recrimination and economic decline.

LIBERAL VICTORIES

Trump is of course directly tied to the rise of the far right, indeed he arguably embodies it, so any trouble he finds himself in is a boon to those who would defend the liberal order. However, it is deeper than that, as there have been a number of notable liberal victories in the political sphere over the past few years.

By far the most prominent of these was the Canadian election of April 2025, where Mark Carney led a resurgent Liberal Party to a third consecutive victory over the Conservatives. Granted, this victory was helped in no small part by Trump's threats against Canada, and the Conservative leader Poilievre's equivocal stance on responding to Trump. But it was still a political triumph for a party that stared defeat in the face only months before, and a shot in the arm for liberals worldwide.

If we needed any other evidence that Liberalism can provide an answer to the rise of the far right, it came in the Dutch elections last October, where the Liberal D66 party topped the polls for the first time in its 60 year history. Crucially, unlike the Canadian Liberals, D66 did not win its plurality on the back of hardening resistance to an outside threat, but instead through becoming the default choice for those voters who wanted to oppose the populist right PVV, which finished in second place.

What these results show is that while the populist right has the ability to mobilise a significant chunk of a society's social base, in so doing it also engenders resistance from those who oppose its illiberal worldview. If those voters are able to unite against the populists, then the populists can be locked out of power.

If, however, they are scattered, then the populists can come through the middle and win on the back of a hardcore base of support.

So far, so hopeful for the liberal order. But I think to truly understand what is going on in the developed world, we need to consider our history. Because if we take a step back and consider what our current political situation actually looks like, it resembles more closely that of the 19th century, rather than the post-1945 period we generally compare ourselves to.

If I were to describe the current British political situation as a centre-left coalition bound by free trade, cultural liberalism and support for social welfare, opposed by a right-wing coalition of 'workerist' populism, nativism and protectionist nationalism, I could just as easily be speaking from the vantage point of the 1890s as of the 2020s.

The main difference, of course, is that only a fraction of the population could vote, which meant that the interests of the working class in particular were only haphazardly represented by the dominant left-wing party. It was largely this failure of the Liberals to adequately represent working class interests that led to it being supplanted by the Labour Party as the main party of the centre-left in the early 20th century.

It was during this fracturing of the old Liberal Party that we saw the two main blocs of liberal thought, economic and cultural, break away from each other and pass into two distinct political traditions.

Rather than being tied to a single party, the British Liberal tradition instead flowed into the very structures of the political system itself, becoming simply 'part of the furniture' of our political worldview. Thus we in the UK assume that the right wing party in British politics is the guardian of economic liberalism, free markets and free trade, while assuming that the left wing party is the guardian of cultural liberalism, equality and human rights.

The idea that a party might arise that is neither culturally nor economically liberal, that instead favours a protectionist form of economic policy and enforced social conservatism, lies outside the bounds of modern British politics.

But it does find a comparison within our 19th century history, where the Tories (and later Conservatives) fought a raging internal war over economic protectionism, that was not fully quelled until their turn towards free trade in the 1920s (partly on the back of Liberal influence). At the same time the 19th century British right was fully committed to nativism at a social level, decrying any attempt to provide Home Rule to Ireland (then part of the United Kingdom), to the point that the Conservative Party under Bonar Law was threatening civil war in response to the New Liberal attempt to force Home Rule in the 1910s.

There is then a tradition of true illiberalism on the British right, a rejection both of the cultural values of liberalism and its economic underpinnings of free trade and free association. This tradition promoted an inward, isolationist approach to foreign policy, prioritised hierachal control over individual expression, and valued social order over economic prosperity. Its high point was in the immediate post-Napoleonic period, with the protectionist Corn Laws of 1815–1846 becoming emblematic of this kind of right-wing politics.

Luckily for us liberals, this period of right-wing illiberalism brought with it a drought of electoral support, allowing the Whigs (and later Liberals) to dominate parliamentary elections between 1832 and 1885. In the period between 1840 and 1885 the liberal parties won a majority or plurality of the vote at every single election. When the right did win it was via seats rather than votes, as in the famous case of 1874, when Gladstone's Liberals won 52% of votes cast, but lost 145 parliamentary seats and were beaten into second place by Disraeli's Conservatives.

What this tells us is that while there is a social base for an illiberal right-wing politics, it is not large enough to dominate politically. The lesson of the 19th century is that there is a liberal majority in the UK that rejects the politics of the illiberal right, but that it is a broad coalition that incorporates many diverse interest groups.

It is often forgotten that the Liberal Party itself was formed from a merger of the Whigs (aristocratic centrist reformers), Radicals (left-liberal firebrands), Peelites (centre-right free traders) and members of the Independent Irish Party (supporters of Irish tenant farmers). This was a loose, diverse coalition held together by support for free trade and broadly optimistic outlook on Britain's future. It worked by absorbing and balancing competing tendencies, allowing it to hold a majority over an insular and truncated right.

To return to the present, what use can we as liberals take from our history? I would say there are two main takeaways we would be mindful of as we consider the rising illiberalism of our own time. The first is that any liberal response to the populist right must be understood as part of a broad but loose coalition. It is clear that majoritarian politics as we knew it in the 20th century is on its way out, and frankly has been since at least the late 1970s. Unlike in the 19th century I do not think that any one party will be able to hold within itself all of the multitude of aspects of liberal thought, as formalised party structures and a mass franchise push parties into hardening their electoral stances.

However, this may not by itself be a bad thing. We do not necessarily need the overarching structure of the old Liberal Party to hold together parliamentary coalitions, not if liberal parties are willing to accept a basic, informal level of co-operation with each other.

“While there is a social base for an illiberal right-wing politics, it is not large enough to dominate politically”

There will be major differences between each, especially on economic issues, but just as the Liberal Party was able to hold within itself both committed centre-right free marketeers and working class radicals, I am confident that there is more that unites than divides us as liberals.

The second is that we are stronger than we think we are. The 19th century Liberal coalition was built on a restricted franchise, meaning that although

Liberals dominated in government, they never truly broke into the broader population in a way that could cement that dominance within mass society. Once universal franchise paved the way for the working class vote, Liberals struggled to compete against more socialist policies. What we are now seeing on the left of British politics is something of a reversal of this trend, with the rapid growth of cultural liberalism becoming a byword for left wing politics. There has been an explosion of liberal thinking across British society since the early 1990s, driven by mass access to university education alongside a bottom-up expansion of tolerance and empathy towards groups formerly seen as social outsiders.

MASSIVE SHIFT

We are now at the point where to be left wing is to be liberal, and no left wing party can credibly attempt to command a parliamentary majority without supporting liberal social policy. This is a massive shift from even 30 years ago, and it is clear that some have not yet adjusted to this new reality. But adjust we must, because a broad, centre left-liberal platform is how we defeat the populists, reform our societies and defend the liberal values that allow our nations to flourish. Indeed the 'New Liberalism' of the 1900s that blended liberal and social democratic thought into a potent answer to social problems has much to teach us in this regard.

Much as in the 19th century, the illiberal right has no real answers to the problems that we face in the 21st century. Their nativism, authoritarianism and social control will lead only to societies based on fear, isolation and poverty. We, and our nations, are better than that. The history of the 21st century remains to be written, and I see no reason why future historians could not look back at the 2020s as the beginning of a new Liberal century.

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A BETTER YESTERDAY

The normally sensible cross-party centre left body Compass has joined with the illiberal nostalgics of Blue Labour. Jonathan Calder looks at what is happening

I've finally worked out who it is that Blue Labour reminds me of: it's Doc Morrissey from *The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin*. In the classic sitcom written by David Nobbs, Perrin, deep in the throes of a midlife crisis, seeks help from Sunshine Desserts' company doctor. They have the following conversation.

Doc Morrissey: "Do you find you can't finish the crossword like you used to, nasty taste in the mouth in the mornings, can't stop thinking about sex, can't start doing anything about sex, wake up with a sweat in the mornings, keep falling asleep during *Play For Today*?"

Reginald Perrin: "That's extraordinary, Doc! That's exactly how I've been feeling."

Doc Morrissey: "So have I. I wonder what it is? Take two aspirins."

Blue Labour, though some MPs claim to owe allegiance to this tendency, is largely Maurice Glasman, and Maurice Glasman is entirely Blue Labour.

And the only coherent thread running through the pronouncements of Maurice Glasman (Lord Glasman – he was made a peer by Ed Miliband in 2010) is an ill-focused, Perrinesque nostalgia for the past of his country and party.

ELIZABETH I

Even that is being kind to him when you consider the misshapen catch that comes up when you trawl for his recent media appearances. Among the views he has expressed are that "in order to be truly radical, Labour must recognise its debt to Jesus Christ"; that the UK's 2050 net zero emissions target is a fantasy that should be abandoned in favour of new fossil fuel extraction while the national grid is taken over by the Ministry of Defence; and that Shabana Mahmood is like Elizabeth I – "She's devoted to her job. She's unique." If Glasman were a social media account, you would have muted it long ago.

Visit the Blue Labour website in search of more intellectual substance and you will be disappointed. The featured post there is 'What Is to Be Done', which dates from October 2025 and is written in a semi-apocalyptic style: "The hour is late."

Nevertheless, there is something in its analysis that Keir Starmer won a "loveless landslide" and came to power without much of a legislative programme or analysis of the country's problems behind him.

The trouble with What Is to Be Done is that it's full of grand statements like "We should bring public services like rail, utilities like water, and critical industries like steel, back into public ownership," but short of any practical proposals for how such ideas can be put into action.

And when it does get close to making such proposals, what we get is an agenda that will be familiar to anyone with a very online Conservative MP: "drastically" reduce immigration, curb the powers of the courts, tell the police to concentrate on repeat offenders. Explore the Blue Labour website and you will find the same high ambitions and shortage of detail in other documents, even its 'Plan for National Reconstruction'.

All of which makes it a surprise to find Compass publishing a document billed as making "the case for a new Soft Left/Blue Labour politics".

Its *Soft Skills, Hard Labour* by Frances Foley, who was until recently the group's deputy director. A surprise because, though it is affiliated to the Labour Party, Compass's emphasis on cross-party working and support for proportional representation has meant that Liberals tend to feel quite warm towards it. So sensible is it that it's chair Neal Lawson has been threatened with expulsion from the Labour Party.

Lawson, incidentally, shares Glasman's sense that Keir Starmer lacks direction. In a recent *Guardian* piece, he suggested that Starmer was promoted as Labour leader by people who decided he was the man to drive Corbynism out of the party.

They assumed there was no chance of the Conservatives being defeated in 2024, so didn't worry about his shortcomings as a future prime minister. He would be gone before Labour got in again. Yet so rapid was the Conservative collapse that Starmer found himself in Number 10. It's a neat mirror image of the Labour leftwinger who said in 2015: "If we'd thought we had a chance of winning the leadership then Jeremy Corbyn wouldn't have been our candidate."

There is no such clarity to be found in *Soft Skills, Hard Labour*. Foley's method is to look at different tendencies within Soft Labour and Blue Labour and then map how they complement each other or conflict across the divide. So we have chapters titled Postliberal Democrats Challenge to the Rules-based Majoritarians and Democratic Communitarians' Challenge to the Rights-based Liberals".

It's a brave effort, but her two main concepts are so diffuse to begin with that it's like trying to do geometry with blancmange.

It may be that Blue Labour has more to it than Glasman's eccentricities – his other recent contributions to debate include apologising to Nigel Farage live on GB News after Keir Starmer said the Reform leader's immigration policy was "racist and immoral" and claiming that progressive liberals "don't want you to enjoy anything, not even sex with your wife!"

There is an essay collection edited by Ian Geary and Adrian Pabst – Blue Labour: Forging a New Politics – but it was published in the very different world of 2015, where it billed itself as seeking to “move beyond the centrist pragmatism of Blair and Cameron”.

Foley is attracted to the appetite she sees in Blue Labour for iconoclasm, which is an attraction I imagine anyone who works

in the very on-message world of pro-Labour think-tanks is likely to feel after a while. She may even be demob happy: her brief biography in ‘Soft Skills, Hard Labour’ reveals she is leaving Compass “to set up a new programme matching young people with jobs in climate, whilst training them in political organising,” which sounds more valuable than what most think-tanks produce.

Whatever the reason, she is right to say: “The word ‘progressive’ strongly implies that change is always for the better, rather than to be questioned or resisted. It also suggests that ‘progress’ is a meaningful – and crucially agreed upon – political concept.”

That is why I try to avoid using this concept, though a stronger reason is the argument put forward by Simon Titley, late of this parish: “‘Progressive’ What does it mean? The only discernible meaning is ‘not conservative’ or ‘not reactionary’... negative definitions. The ‘p’ word is a lazy word, so give it up. It will force you to say what you really mean. We need real politics not empty slogans.

Similarly, when Foley writes of what she terms “Rights-based Liberals”, she says: “They tend to assert the primacy of rights as a priori, not as social constructs created by citizens, but as a first order framework that sets the parameters for what is politically viable. In this sense, Rights-based Liberals see rights as trumping pure democratic sovereignty, setting limits on what democratic societies can decide.”

She is right about the attitude of many on the left towards rights: we should never forget they are human inventions and not somehow ordained by nature.

But there is a better, more pragmatic argument for human rights: by inventing them we increase the chances that government will treat us well. A good example of this is the right to petition for a writ of habeus corpus – a right hoary enough, surely, to win the support of even Maurice Glasman. Nor is it clear how the working class will benefit from any abolition of rights: it’s the powerful who benefit in a free-for-all, as we see in news reports from the US every evening.

YOUR LATHE

But then it’s often hard to see how the working class will benefit from any Blue Labour policies. The only mention of education you’re likely to come across in Blue Labour circles is vocational education: you rarely get the sense that they are much interested in the number of working-class university students or entrepreneurs. What they are telling working-class young people is that somewhere there is a lathe with your name on it and I remain unconvinced that is what

“Her two main concepts are so diffuse to begin with that it’s like trying to do geometry with blancmange”

all of them want.

It’s easy, and it’s largely justifiable, to dismiss Blue Labour as offering nostalgia for a vanished industrial world, but too much comment on social media from people who like to think they are on the left treats the past as something to point at and laugh.

Such comment is all about the performative adoption of approved cultural opinions: nowhere will you see it

mentioned that the 1950s saw full employment and record levels of trade union membership or that the 1970s saw the greatest income equality Britain has ever enjoyed.

One thing Blue Labour has got right is that many self-styled ‘progressives’ aren’t much interested in the working class: it’s just that I’m not convinced Blue Labour is much interested in the working class as it exists today either. Maurice Glasman’s target voter is a white working-class man in a manual job in the north of England in 1957.

Treating the past as a reminder that our current economic and social arrangements are not set in stone and things could be and have been different is sensible.

But demanding we return to this past, and demanding it without so much as making a gesture towards providing a route map, is ridiculous. I didn’t get where I am today without knowing the difference.

Jonathan Calder is a member of the Liberator Collective

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ROUND IN CIRCLES ON RACE EQUALITY

Endless reviews by the party on engaging with ethnic minorities have seen little happen. Will it ever change, wonders Rod Lynch

The Liberal Democrats are a political home I still believe in but one that must finally listen on race.

I joined the Liberal Democrats more than 24 years ago because I was looking for a political home.

Not a convenience. Not a career ladder. A home.

I am Black. West Indian. Windrush parentage. I grew up believing politics was something done to people like me, not with us. I joined the Liberal Democrats because I thought I had found a party that understood power should be shared, not hoarded. A party serious about fairness, not just comfortable talking about it.

I am still here. That matters.

But staying loyal does not mean staying silent.

Over the years I have worked inside the party. I helped found the Liberal Democrat Campaign for Race Equality (LDCRE). Before that, I was involved in Ethnic Minority Liberal Democrats (EMLD). I sat on the 2019 general election review panel after we failed badly. I have written reports. Made recommendations. Sat through conference debates. Watched motions pass. Watched them quietly stall. This isn't bitterness. It is memory.

REVIEWED TO DEATH

We keep writing the same report. We have reviewed ourselves to death. Diversity reviews, election reviews, governance reviews, inclusion strategies. Six years on from the Alderdice Review and still no joined-up strategy with teeth. Still no real implementation plan that conference can hold accountable. Still no language of intersectionality embedded in how the party actually works.

We say we want to be a modern party in a modern Britain. Then we behave like change is an optional extra.

In 2019, after tens of thousands of emails and hundreds of submissions, members said the same thing clearly: we do not engage with all communities. We do not listen early enough. We do not trust voices that challenge us on race.

I would like to say we learned the lesson. I'm not convinced we did.

I sit on boards. I chair organisations. I advise at senior level. When I speak, people listen. When I recommend change, it gets implemented.

But Inside the party, I am often treated as a problem. I have been told people "hate" me. When I ask why, the answer is always the same: because I ask for equality. Because I insist on being treated the same as everyone else. Because I don't soften the message to make others comfortable. That should worry us.

There are cliques in this party. Unwritten networks. Quiet email chains deciding who is acceptable and who isn't. I know this because colleagues have told me they refused to show me the evidence because they didn't

want to lose trust with their friends. That silence is part of the problem.

Representation isn't a nice-to-have. Let us look at the facts.

We have one MP of mixed Black heritage in the Commons. One Black Dame in the Lords, appointed by the Conservatives, not us. That is not bad luck. That's structural failure.

We talk about community politics. But on the doorstep, what are we selling to Black and Brown voters? Who are they supposed to see themselves in? What signal are we sending when our committees, shortlists, and leadership spaces do not resemble the country we want to govern?

The Stella programme showed what's possible. It worked. It helped bring through MPs Josh Babarinde, Victoria Collins and Bobby Dean. It proved that talent is there if you actually invest in it.

So why hasn't it been scaled? Why are people recruited by LDCRE and others still waiting for assessments? Why is there no clear communication when delays happen?

When systems fail silently, people assume the worst. And we let that happen.

Allies are only useful when it's hard. There's no shortage of people happy to be allies when it costs them nothing. Far fewer when it means giving up space, power, or control.

Conference motions on diversity pass. Then get diluted. Sent back. Parked. Reworded into safety. The party congratulates itself for being "nice" while change crawls.

Being nice has never been a substitute for being fair.

When Motion F10 passed on candidate selections, it should have marked a turning point. Instead, it became another example of how the party finds ways to delay what makes it uncomfortable. Modernisation doesn't mean erasing the past. It means accepting that standing still is moving backwards.

LISTENING TOO LATE

Listening only when it's too late. I warned about Covid-19 early. I spoke to clinicians, union representatives and broadcasters. I brought concerns into the party. Nothing happened. Months later, it became obvious to everyone.

I warned after the 2019 election that being second in 91 seats was an opportunity. A base to build from. A signal. That insight was ignored until others said it later, louder, and got credit for it.

This pattern is familiar. When ideas come from certain mouths, they're treated as disruptive. When they come from others, they're treated as strategic. That's not how serious organisations work.

I have supported leaders in this party. I supported

Ed Davey. I still do. I believe he wants change. I have seen good work from colleagues like Josh Babarinde, Victoria Collins, Munira Wilson, and others who understand that liberalism without inclusion is hollow.

But leadership isn't just about intention. It's about follow-through. If conference is sovereign, we must fund what it votes for. If inclusion matters, we must resource it. That may mean asking members to dig deeper while other parties throw silly money around. We cannot keep saying "later" while expecting different results.

I am disabled. I have used the NHS more times than most people reading this. I've lived with cancer, diabetes and medical negligence. I am clinically blind. These experiences don't sit in separate boxes.

Neither should our politics. Intersectionality isn't jargon. It's reality. People live at the crossing points of race, disability, class, gender, and health. If our policies and structures don't reflect that, they fail real people.

I will keep fighting on disability rights. And race equality. And for those the party doesn't always see. Not because it's easy. Because it's necessary.

Why am I still here? I am still a Liberal Democrat because the values still matter.

Because the preamble to the constitution mattered to me when I joined. Because I've seen what this party can do when it acts with courage.

"We say we want to be a modern party in a modern Britain. Then we behave like change is an optional extra"

I have also made peace with mortality. My cancer is in remission, though it has crept back. I'm not in immediate danger. But clarity changes you.

I have seen a young Black mixed-heritage man elected President of our party. An Anglo-Asian woman as vice president. I am about to become a grandparent

again.

Those things matter. But I want more. More Black and Brown MPs. More peers. More people looking at this party and thinking: "I belong there."

The questions we keep avoiding include that we are colleagues, not enemies, but some people are opponents of change, and pretending otherwise helps no one.

So here's what I leave you with. If not now, when? If not us, who? What does a modern liberal party actually look like in practice not on paper?

Why do we trust reports more than the people living the reality they describe? Who benefits from delay? Who pays the price for it? And when the next review is written, will it say anything we didn't already know?

The mirror is there. The question is whether we're brave enough to look.

Rod Lynch is vice-chair of the Liberal Democrat Campaign for Race Equality

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STRANGLED BY RED TAPE

Demands from bureaucrats and local authorities for policies and business plans are endangering the ability to function for small voluntary organisations, says Gwyneth Deakins

It is well known that the voluntary sector in Britain is at crisis point - although you wouldn't know that from mainstream press except of course the *Guardian*. The sector is under attack from all sides, but there is one problem which could be tackled by regulators and other institutions – red tape.

The obvious and most reported challenge is funding – less money is forthcoming from Government, and local authorities, a major source of funding for a huge number of voluntary organisations are now stripped of the ability to fund anything except their own deficits.

In addition fewer people are giving (though the total amount donated is not reducing – some big donors giving to big causes and that has no relevance to the small local groups).

And charities that sell goods and services are experiencing a drop in income as the cost-of-living crisis reduces demand (such as Oxfam suffering losses from its shops).

I have looked in vain for any evidence of a Government strategy for the voluntary sector yet everyone knows the massive contribution to society and economy by voluntary organisations. That's not just those providing direct care for the disadvantaged, like food banks, hospices, mental health support, but also the ones weaving the fabric of society, such as residents' associations, heritage preservation, sports groups. David Cameron's announcement of 'the Big Society' was ridiculous as it existed all along.

DIRE SITUATION

Most of the concern about the voluntary sector expressed in the media focuses understandably on big charities like the Royal National Lifeboat Institute and Oxfam. But the situation is more dire for small local organisations without the advantages of size and name recognition. Surely it is time for a review of how small voluntary organisations and charities are, or are not, managing in the current economic and social climate.

Currently too much of what they are required to do seems to be based on assumption that all charities have paid staff with expertise in finance, IT, etc. They don't. The smaller ones have only volunteers and they and the trustees disproportionately consist of older retired people. As is well documented, they (we!) are the only ones with the time and apparently the commitment. They of course have less familiarity with IT. And obtaining professional help costs money.

Even smallest charities/ voluntary organisations now need facilities and skills to run them that they didn't need 30 or more years ago. For example, a website, a social media presence, internet banking, electronic payments, an on-line booking system. These systems may work OK when they are up and running but

setting them up is often a nightmare. The systems are presumably set up with the best intentions to prevent misuse, hacking, fraud etc. but that turns the process into a stressful and time-consuming horror.

Banks. Everyone knows how exceptionally complicated and slow it is to change account signatories; In that respect the system works little better than in the days of pen and paper. While internet banking has on the whole made life easier for the individual consumer it has not, in my experience, helped one iota in making it easier to run a small organisation.

I should make a special mention for Charities Aid Foundation bank which was specially established for charities so it should be extra specially helpful. In fact its Byzantine procedures are a nightmare. It changed its system last year which led to a meltdown little reported outside the charity and finance worlds. Many charities had staff unpaid, direct debits lost, accounts locked up. Some of the problems persist and its procedures remain obscure and counter-intuitive. Most of the user-unfriendly features are set up in name of security.

But it seems that the same levels of fraud prevention are applied to tiny groups as to large organisations. The level of regulation is wholly disproportionate to the risk.

And another thing. Back in the day we didn't need a business plan, a health and safety policy, a diversity policy, a safeguarding policy and so on. While not always legally required these items are always asked for by potential funders. Naturally one can see the need for and benefit of these things individually, but collectively they represent an administrative burden that distracts from the central business of delivering the service.

Does having them practically improve our services? Not really. Does it demonstrate that we are kosher? Not necessarily. No-one is asking whether the provision of mounds of paperwork actually proves that in real life an organisation is worthy of receiving a grant. And anyone determined to abuse the system will do so regardless.

Gift Aid is a great idea of course. But claiming it means having to register with HMRC - to fill in a long form with detailed information about the charity's trustees/board members. Then to send in (on paper) copies of governing document, bank statements, certificate of registration as a charity.

Why the latter? How would we be on the Charity Commission's website if we weren't a registered charity? Surely all the necessary information is there. And when I asked the Charity Commission for a copy of our organisation's certificate, weeks went by then they sent the wrong document.

To request it I apparently had to register myself and go through another process. Just as I had officially lost the will to live our 90-year-old treasurer found a copy of the certificate from 1978.

Actually claiming Gift Aid online via the HMRC website can be a nightmare – when the treasurer of one charity where I am a trustee died suddenly taking the password with her, we found it impossible for HMRC to retrieve it or reset it even after writing to our local MP. We have to apply via a paper form.

Local authorities have traditionally been supporters of local voluntary organisations but they themselves are now, in addition to cutting funding, contributing to the red tape overload, partly no doubt as a means to raise revenue for themselves.

IMPERILLED EVENTS

For example my local residents' association has run a Summer Fun Day in our local park safely for many years but we are now hit with demands for us to hire extra toilets, increase insurance, pay extra fees for stalls, pay to have St John's Ambulance present, produce food safety certificates and recently we have been threatened with having to pay for use of the park itself. The sum of meeting all the demands amounts to thousands of pounds and imperils our ability to hold the event at all. Like many others our local authority has a policy of supporting voluntary organisations but of course that is irrelevant in practice.

The difficulty of getting people willing and able to act as trustees or volunteers is very much exacerbated by necessity of dealing with all this work. Although I am an ex-civil servant with 30 years' experience of dealing with bureaucracy I still find it difficult, demotivating and distracting from key priorities like fundraising and long-term strategy.

“No-one is asking whether the provision of mounds of paperwork actually proves that in real life an organisation is worthy of receiving a grant”

And as many will know fundraising itself is a massively time-consuming task – again, more complicated than it was in the past.

What's to be done? The Blair Labour government established a Better Regulation Task Force – which cynics may have thought was the Tories' deregulation drive under a different name, but it was not.

The Task Force would review in detail the regulatory and quasi-statutory measures applying

to a particular a sector and make recommendations as to how it could run better without unnecessary restrictions. The voluntary sector desperately needs that kind of review now – not just to examine Government regulation but how other key institutions like banks, local authorities and insurers deal with it. One of key tenets of the Better Regulation initiative was that regulation should be risk-based, so the level of regulation should be proportionate to the level of risk. The risk of malfeasance in a tiny charity with £2,000 in the bank is minuscule but at the moment there is no escape from the full monty of regulation.

Gwyneth Deakins is a former Liberal Democrat councillor in Redbridge and Tower Hamlets

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DYING FOR KING AND COUNTRY

The country hasn't fought for its young people, so who would fight and die for the UK, ask Wendy Kyrle-Pope and Oliver Walker

In 1933, the Oxford Union held its infamous debate on the motion "That this house will in no circumstances fight for King and Country". The motion was passed 275 to 153. The establishment was outraged; there was a media storm; and, a few days later, a group of men (possibly Mosley's Blackshirts? the Boat Club? Undergraduates?) broke into the Union, seized the minutes book and burned it on the steps of the Martyrs' Memorial.

With hindsight, the result of that debate is easy to understand. The Great War ended only 15 years before, with over one million British dead, and so many maimed. The debaters on both sides would have lost fathers and uncles, even brothers, in that carnage.

And this anti-war sentiment was shared through all levels of society, not just the Oxford elite. All families had lost someone. The country had gone through the Great Depression, cleaving it in half; Unemployment was nearly 3.0m, 20% of the working population, with the North East and Wales bearing the brunt. Jarrow's MP famously said, "The town had been murdered." In the Midlands and the South East, there were signs of the green shoots of economic recovery as the new light industries began to develop.

Travel forward 90 plus years, to 2025, to a September conference fringe, where an MP from Ukraine gave an impassioned speech on behalf of his country, citing the many dangers, depredations and desperate need for military Aid. The first duty of any government is the defence of the realm, and it is Ukraine that is defending our realm by doggedly and courageously fighting the Russians.

WAR IN EUROPE

The fringe was Liberal International's, entitled On the Brink - Wake up and Smell the Cordite, which looked at the US and Russia, internally and externally, and how likely the latter would be to forge a war in Europe (answer - very likely) and how likely the former would come to the defence of Europe (answer - nobody knows from one day to the next).

The meeting continued to explore how ready the UK and its armed forces are should the threat from Russia become a reality, and the depressing conclusion was that we need much larger and better, more suitably equipped forces. Membership of the armed forces has dropped by 25% since 2012, when they were already badly depleted by years of Government cuts, basically wasting the 'peace dividend' which had lasted since 1945.

Labour's Strategic Defence Review has called for a 20% increase in active reservists and an increase in the Army from its current 73,800 to more than 76,000,

as well as a rethink on the most effective weapons. One would hope they would be more ambitious and find the cash for a serious overhaul of all our defences.

The speakers also noted that modern warfare demands not only manpower but a new style of warfare, especially drones, and whether the domestic industrial base is capable of producing munitions on a large enough scale. Britain currently falls short in this area, raising uncomfortable questions about our real preparedness for a conflict with Russia, with one speaker leaving us with the sombre message we should have started ramping our defences up on 24 February 2022 (the day Russia launched the war with Ukraine).

Our lack of preparedness for this new style of warfare risks lives.

But who would fight? A comment from the floor brought this into sharp focus: young people have few incentives to feel that they have a country worth fighting for.

A recent poll showed that only 11% of Gen Z would be prepared to fight. This figure is not merely a statistic; it is a warning signal. If national defence ultimately depends on the willingness of citizens to defend the state, then a generational collapse of confidence represents a strategic vulnerability.

The most recent conflicts where our troops were engaged do not inspire much confidence either. All our heroic efforts in Afghanistan came to nothing, and took the lives of 457 soldiers. The Iraq War achieved little, other than fostering mistrust in a Government who so blithely took us into that war on the premise that Saddam's weapons of mass destruction were such a massive threat, while 179 died and the weapons which turned out to be mythical.

Oliver Walker explains: "The reason why young people like me would not fight for my country is quite simply that the social contract feels broken.

"I did as I was advised by those older and more experienced in life than myself: studied hard, got good grades and worked all too often long 70-hour weeks. So, like many in my generation, I am still stuck living at home; of course, many have it worse and are stuck renting, paying significant amounts of money month after month to own nothing. Young people are underpaid, overworked, and exhausted."

Home ownership is out of reach for most, trapped in expensive rentals (inflated by buy-to-let mortgages) or unstable zero-hour contracts, making mortgages a fantasy. Single-income households are locked out entirely, with day-to-day living expenses like food, electricity and petrol also increasing faster than income. Saving for a deposit gets harder for each generation compared to the generation that came

before them.

Jobs barely cover the basics. Many rely on in-work benefits just to make ends meet as zero/low-hour contracts become the norm, so companies can send staff home at the drop of a hat, and keep staff desperate for overtime, because there is no guarantee of future income.

DANGLED LIKE CARROTS

Apprenticeships are often used as cheap labour, too often offering little real training. Promotions are dangled like carrots, but often never arrive, or when they do, staffing gets cut, putting anyone in management in a position where they have to work overtime for free to make up the shortfall, otherwise their department will fail, and their position gets questioned. I was kept on a 'nine-month' management course at a major supermarket for nearly two years, for no extra pay, but all the responsibility.

Relationships with family and partners are strained. Delayed. Sometimes impossible. It's hard to build a life or plan for children when you cannot afford a place of your own, or when you are working 60–70 hours a week just to scrape together a deposit. We're told family is everything, but society has priced us out of having one.

The bigger picture, the 2008 crash showed us something ugly: the people who wrecked the economy faced no real consequences. Companies are able to use debt to pay shareholders dividends, passing on the increases in cost to the consumer.

Meanwhile, we're still paying the price in stagnant wages, slashed services, and rising costs.

So when people ask why many young people would not fight for their country in a future conflict, the answer is simple: this country has not fought for us.

So what to do? We cannot reasonably expect this generation to feel patriotic towards a system that has consistently failed them. Because if we want people to believe in Britain again - enough to protect it, to serve it, perhaps even to fight for it - then Britain must believe in them first.

We must rebuild the social contract. That means building affordable housing, work that's dignified and secure, healthcare that does not buckle, and an education system that opens doors, not debt statements. It means creating a country where sacrifice is honoured, not exploited.

We must fight here at home, for fairness, for opportunity, for a society that does not grind down its young but lifts them up. That is a war worth waging.

And if we succeed, perhaps then more people will feel they have something worth defending. Not out of blind duty, but out of genuine love for a society that stands with the, not just in war, but in peace.

Everything connects: poor housing, expensive housing, unemployment, lack of permanent, secure employment, and lack of economic responsibility. It is easy to understand and sympathise with their point of view - why fight for a country with so much inequality? As people felt in 1933.

"Our lack of preparedness for this new style of warfare risks lives"

We cannot even retain our current serving military personnel. In 2024, 12,850 joined the Army, but 14,830 left, often citing the appalling accommodation as one of the main reasons; there are other issues.

Volunteer armies fight better; pressed men (and women) do not. A modern military cannot function if experience walks out the door faster than new recruits can replace it.

Ironically, it was the preparation for the Second World War which kick-started the economy, and the political and social changes the 6 years of war brought gave birth to the NHS, a more universal social security system and, eventually, massive house building/slum clearance programmes. The economy has had a roller coaster ride for the past 70 years, but, as Oliver points out, we are losing those hard-fought improvements in equality and security. For the first time in generations, many young people believe their futures will be worse than their parents', a reversal historically associated with political instability and declining civic trust.

Would an imminent and immediate threat change people's minds? Perhaps, but time is running out. And as Oliver puts it The first step toward national defence isn't bigger bombs—it's a better Britain

Wendy Kyrle-Pope is a member of the Liberator Collective and treasurer of Liberal International British Group. Oliver Walker was the Liberal Democrat candidate for Droitwich and Evesham at the 2024 general election



Liberal International British Group Online Forum on Turkey

9 February 2026 at 6.30pm

The panellists will be:

Baroness Meral Hussein-Ece, member of the Lords Bülent Kenes, Turkish journalist, Executive Director of the European Centre for Populism Studies Sir Graham Watson, Chair of LIBG, professor at Toronto University

The debate will be moderated by Antoine Godbert, member of the LIBG executive, and professor of geopolitics at ESCP Business School.

For details and access please see: <https://www.libg.uk/forthcoming-events>

LOOK EAST FOR LVT

Land value taxation could replace the mansion tax, and Rosemary Runwick finds a working example from long ago

November's budget was poorly received and due to Labour sticking to their fiscal rules of not raising income tax they had to introduce several stealth taxes, one being a so-called mansion tax, charged on property worth more than £2m. This is too small a change in taxation to solve the housing crisis.

It's very unlikely any minor tweak to our current system of property tax will solve it; as Josh Ryan-Collins of The Guardian found [<https://www.theguardian.com/society/commentisfree/2025/oct/15/stamp-duty-britain-housing-crisis-property-tax-economists>], the current property tax system has led to investments largely focusing on property and not business, and is a key factor in the country's stagnant productivity and growth.

During the early 20th century, the German colony of Tsingtao on the coast of China achieved a property market with little speculation, and it did so without ever taxing it.

Tsingtao had been seized by the German Navy from Qing China in 1897 as retaliation for an attack against German missionaries. This put it in a unique position compared with all other German colonies as it was not controlled by the Imperial Colonial Office, but the navy, giving it a level of administrative independence.

One of the first problems was the question of land speculation, as they had seen the problems it had caused in Germany's other colonies, with Admiral von Diedrichs, the first Governor of Tsingtao stating: "It was our firm conviction from the outset that land speculation ... had to be made impossible."

As such, only three taxes were implemented, a high Real Estate Tax, a Trade Tax, (levied by Qing China, who included it as a condition for continued German occupation) and most importantly, a Land Value Tax. (LVT)

All land could be bought or sold at auction, and would be taxed monthly at 6%, with the value being reassessed every three years. If the value had increased by the next sale/transfer - or every 25 years, if it had not changed hands - a one-off tax of 33% would be applied to capture the unearned income. As a further measure against hoarding and speculation, if a privately-owned plot of land was found to have been unused after three years, the taxation rate would increase by 3%, repeating this process until it reached a maximum rate of 24%.

This turned out to be incredibly successful, and has an impact far beyond its time; not only was speculation effectively ended, keeping land and property prices down to realistic levels, and the punishing system against land hoarding meant development was encouraged, allowing business to boom; the most famous example being the Tsingtao Brewery, established in 1903 and now the second largest in China, accounting for 15% of its market.

The colony would also inspire Chinese Nationalist Sun Yat-sen, a key figure in the overthrow of the Qing, who stated: "I liked Tsingtao quite immensely, and if just ten people from each of our 500 counties were to go to Tsingtao to study its administration, an infinite amount of good could be achieved for China." To this day his influence can be felt in the Taiwan where his successor, Chiang Kai-shek, implemented an annual progressive LVT with a range of 1%-5.5% depending on value, and a more complex one on property transfers, though it is usually charged at around 20-40% of the sale.

The German regime in Tsingtao was not run for the benefit of all people living there, and was by no means some model society for Liberals, its purpose was to extract the natural resources of the region for the benefit of the coloniser, as such most of the political systems were biased towards the Germans, who held the first right to buy Chinese-owned land that was sold.

Representative bodies were based on race and property ownership, and the court system applied different laws depending on whether the person concerned Chinese or German. It goes without saying this was bad and shouldn't be replicated.

Regardless, it's easy to see how the more beneficial parts of Tsingtao's tax system could help England. According to latest ONS figures, 91% of Britain's land is undeveloped, and 65% of land is owned by the gentry, corporations and city bankers, compared to a mere 5% in the hands of homeowners, and we have been stuck around this figure for centuries.

LVT's encouragement to develop would create the impetus for more housing, and reduce the speculation that usually keeps it out of ordinary people's hands. Perhaps even more frustratingly, the original draft of the People's Budget, introduced by the Liberal Asquith Government in 1909 did include a LVT, but was dropped as part of the compromise with the House of Lords, (whose members owned a lot of land!).

It is ironic that Liberal Democrats still sing 'The Land' at conference, a song adopted in the 1910 election campaign to promote what became a broken promise.

With the traditional gentry soon to be removed from the Lords, maybe it's time we finished what Asquith couldn't

Rosemary Runwick is a Liberal Democrat activist in West Suffolk and blogs at the 'New Model Liberal'

TIME TO CUT THE GRASS

Lib Dem activists are rushed off their feet because the party fails to recruit, says John Shreeve

Liberal Democrat activists are incredibly, committed, busy people, so the standing joke that a typical Lib Dem home needs the grass cutting, the windows need paint and a child's rusty swing sits in the garden, makes us smile but has a ring of uncomfortable truth. Why are our homes in such a state?

Simple. There's too much to do, another focus to deliver, doors to knock on, training to attend, and local parties to keep afloat. Our time is sucked up by a voracious Liberal Democrat sponge.

The answer is simple, get more help. Not enough activists. Find the help, win the election, cut the grass, it's that simple.

But member recruitment and retention has been ignored at the centre for a very long time with campaigning prioritised in the belief that winning elections can be translated into growth.

Despite control over more councils and 72 MP membership has fallen from over 100,000 a few years ago to the mid 50,000s and although slowing continues to fall. The crazy thing is that with political differences now so stark our ability to stand out has never been better, there is no reason for us to continue to be a mystery to the public other than where we're strong in local government.

So we agree we need activists, but will we face the fact that for decades we've avoided the subject, hoping it will simply go away. When will we invest the time and effort into member retention and growth instead of the 'we exist to win' obsession?

What comes first, the chicken or the egg?

Campaigning knowing you're likely to lose because you don't have the capacity to win, or gaining capacity, but while you do, not having the time to campaign, either way there's a price to pay.

It's not a binary choice. If the campaign message is good enough and if a local party is equipped and ready to welcome new members then recruitment and retention stands a chance. It's a matter of time and priorities.

But even though this is incredibly important the reason recruitment and retention is an uphill struggle is the absence of core underlying purpose. The 'what's the point of the Lib Dems' issue.

For most voters, indeed for most of our sleeping activists, politics is about what's on the 6 o'clock news, Trump, the NHS, Greenland and the collapse of NATO and a Labour government making yet another handbrake turn. It is not about restoring the number 24 bus.

So it's imperative that we find more activists, and even more imperative we know why we're here. On the ground where we have capacity to stuff paper through doors and speak to voters our national profile is one dominated by our role in local government. But for those where politics is the 6 o'clock news and where

the contrast between liberal values and those at the extremes of political debate is the story, whether the 24 bus runs pales into insignificance.

The message then sits at the apex of everything, our public profile, our policies, our reason for being. There is no doubt that the stark divide in our politics that leads some to see fascism as preferable creates the alternative desire by many for a clear opposing philosophy.

That vast swathe of the electorate so desperate for help only needs the right trigger to want to champion what it is to be a liberal, but just like our avoidance of tackling the activist issue our performance over who we are what we want is even more ridiculous.

Our democracy faces an existential threat. Our feudal system and hangover from empire has resulted in an almost total absence of political debate and consciousness. Knowing your place still resonates, so any notion of equality for citizens is a concept that for most will need very careful connection to their lived experience.

None of this will be easy. As Reform would describe us, the old 'legacy parties' are self-interested, centred on the retention of what they have. Our timidity then plays very well into such an accusation.

Where we take the stance of councillors and MPs as hard working local heroes we avoid the need for the party to have any determined purpose. If that's the best way to retain what you have it's much easier to achieve if your hero doesn't suffer from the taint of a national message that distracts. It's then wise to ask our leader to wear a wet suit and slide down a water slide, as it raises our profile, is essentially harmless but says very little.

If we continue to dedicate ourselves to not rocking the boat as the best route to retaining what we have we will fail.

So, for the sake of all those so desperate for a political home as the answer to the politics of hate, and who just might help us to cut the grass, let us be brave and connect everything we do to our core liberal values of equality from birth, and freedom as the source of optimism.

John Shreeve is chair of the Social Liberal Forum

LETTERS

PUZZLED VOTER

Dear Liberator,

It doesn't need a committee of enquiry to find out whether there is anything in the party internal electoral process deters people from voting (Liberator 432). This year's Federal Election process wasn't user friendly. Whereas in the past manifestos were provided in booklets containing all the manifestos for each committee this year there were individual manifestos that required downloading separately making it a tedious process which is unlikely to do justice to all the candidates.

Initially it isn't clear whether people can vote for each category separately until the process is started. Whilst it is possible without it being explained it can be off putting. There was an email survey asking how someone who voted found the process although it didn't really give scope for explaining what the problems were. After submitting it the message came up that it hadn't been accepted resulting in my attempting to start the voting process again to make sure that my vote had been recorded giving the erroneous impression that I was attempting to vote twice.

If that wasn't enough there was a ballot for my regional party that was even less user friendly in that people were required to submit a vote for the chair, vice chair, treasurer and English Council members at the same time to the extent that if you didn't submit a vote you weren't allowed to proceed to the next category which was problematical as it meant having to record a vote for one category where I knew nothing about the two candidates who also provided no manifesto before I could vote for English Council members.

Surely an electoral process should provide for people to send an empty ballot paper not to mention the provision to submit a spoiled ballot paper.

For a party that claims to bridge the digital divide it has yet to acknowledge that IT is there to serve people not the other way round or does this sound too much like common sense.

Andrew Hudson
Ulveston

BACKING DETERRENCE

Dear Liberator

Weakness is not a peace plan. Peace through strength has become an unfashionable phrase in liberal politics. Too often, it is dismissed as code for militarism, chest-thumping, or uncritical alignment with great-power interests. That suspicion is understandable. But abandoning the concept entirely has left liberals without a serious answer to a more dangerous world.

The uncomfortable truth is this: deterrence fails not because it is immoral, but because it is neglected. Liberal societies do not drift into conflict because they prepare too well; they invite aggression when they mistake restraint for weakness and rhetoric for capability.

Peace through strength, properly understood, is not about belligerence. It is about credibility. And credibility begins with honesty; honesty about threats, about our own limitations, and about the costs of

pretending that good intentions are enough.

If liberal internationalism is to survive the coming decade, it must recover the courage to be clear with itself before it ever confronts others. Strength is restraint, not swagger

For liberals, strength cannot mean the unrestrained use of force. It must be bound by law, accountable to democratic institutions, and directed toward protecting agency rather than denying it.

A credible deterrent does not make war more likely; it makes restraint believable. When adversaries believe that violations will be met with proportionate, lawful, and decisive responses, escalation becomes less attractive, not more.

This is where much contemporary debate goes wrong. Strength is mistaken for aggression, while restraint is mistaken for passivity. In reality, restraint without capability is not virtue; it is abdication.

A liberal conception of strength is therefore inseparable from legitimacy. It relies on parliamentary scrutiny, clear legal frameworks, and a willingness to explain not only what we are doing, but why. Without those anchors, deterrence becomes either empty signalling or something far worse.

For liberals, the case for deterrence is not rooted in pessimism about human nature, but in realism about power. Liberalism begins from the premise that coercion exists, that it will not disappear through goodwill alone, and that unaccountable power is most dangerous when it goes unchallenged.

International law, norms, and institutions matter profoundly. But they are not self-enforcing. They rely on states that are willing and able to defend them, not selectively, but consistently. When aggressors learn that violations carry no meaningful cost, rules decay into rhetoric.

This is often where liberal discomfort sets in. The fear is that accepting the need for deterrence means conceding too much to force, or abandoning the aspiration to reduce violence. In reality, the opposite is true. Deterrence is not a celebration of force; it is a strategy for limiting its use.

A liberal international order without enforcement is fragile. It asks those most at risk, small states, exposed democracies, and minorities within contested regions, to bear the costs of our moral hesitation. That is not a restraint. It is displacement.

Defending liberal democracy from aggressors requires more than persuasion. It requires the credible promise that attempts to destroy it will fail.

The character of conflict has changed, and liberal defence policy must change with it. The assumption that war will arrive solely in the form of large-scale conventional invasion is no longer sufficient.

Modern conflict now routinely targets critical infrastructure, information systems, democratic processes, economic resilience, and the credibility of alliances themselves. Deterrence must therefore be multidimensional. Military capability remains essential, but it is no longer enough on its own.

For the UK, this means being honest about both fragility and strength. Chronic procurement delays, overstretched stockpiles, and reliance on just-in-time logistics are not technical details; they are strategic vulnerabilities. Pretending otherwise does not preserve peace. It erodes it.

Deterrence does not begin when a crisis breaks out. It must be built quietly, over the years, through investment, training, and institutional memory. Once a confrontation is visible, most of the relevant decisions have already been made.

This is why liberal governments do themselves no favours by talking tough while deferring hard choices. Capability gaps cannot be filled by urgency alone, and credibility cannot be improvised. Strength that arrives late is indistinguishable from weakness.

Liberal democracies rarely act alone, nor should they. Alliances are not moral accessories; they are practical expressions of shared interests and mutual restraint. Their value lies not in symbolism, but in planning, interoperability, and the assurance that aggression against one will not be treated as an isolated event. That assurance only works if members are willing to contribute seriously, rather than free-ride on assumed protection.

For the UK, this means aligning ambition with capacity. Announcing commitments that cannot be sustained undermines trust just as surely as failing to make commitments at all.

A liberal approach to alliances insists on responsibility to both partners and domestic publics.

Parliamentary oversight and transparent objectives are not obstacles to security; they are what make collective defence politically durable.

Development, diplomacy, and defence are not rivals. Liberals are correct to insist that security cannot be reduced to military spending alone.

Diplomacy and development remain indispensable tools of conflict prevention. But treating them as substitutes for defence is a category error. Cuts to development to paper over defence shortfalls are not just morally questionable; they are strategically incoherent. Equally incoherent is the belief that aid can compensate for the absence of credible deterrence.

The relationship between defence, diplomacy, and development is not zero-sum. Weakness in one undermines the others. A liberal strategy recognises that preventing conflict requires all three to work together, each reinforcing the others rather than being pitted against them.

At its core, liberalism is a doctrine of limits; limits on power, limits on violence, and limits enforced by law rather than whim. But limits hold only if they are backed by institutions capable of implementing them.

A foreign policy that relies on moral signalling without material support does not defend liberal values; it exposes them. Conversely, a defence posture divorced from legality and democratic consent corrodes the very freedoms it claims to protect.

Liberal internationalism with teeth does not promise safety without cost, or justice without risk. What it promises instead is seriousness; the refusal to pretend that values can survive without defenders, or that restraint can substitute for readiness.

The task for liberals is not to choose between strength and restraint, but to insist on both. Peace is not preserved by wishing threats away, nor by pretending that norms enforce themselves. Weakness is not a peace plan. Serious liberalism demands better.

Jack Meredith
Aberavon and Neath



REVIEWS

Royal Mint, National Debt by Norman Baker Biteback £22

The former Lib Dem MP for Lewes has followed his 2022 assault on the Windsors' conduct in *And What Do You Do – What The Royal Family Don't Want You To Know.*, with a forensic dissection of their finances.

It's enough to make anyone a republican. While it is hardly a surprise that the royals live in luxury in palaces attended by retainers, the unremitting greed shown by them - and detailed by Baker - is quite jaw-dropping.

From the mysterious migration of duchies of Cornwall and Lancaster from public to 'private' hands, through to a tacky soliciting of gifts and holiday freebies, there appears no limit to the family's insatiable desire for money.

Calling Baker's research 'forensic' barely does him justice as he trawls through vast and obscure records and Freedom of Information answers to assemble a picture of how goods and services that should be paid by the royals personally end up being billed to the taxpayer.

Baker's work was made more arduous by the secrecy surrounding royal finances. Almost nothing is in the public domain and regal lobbying has seen their loot hidden from prying eyes.

It was perhaps understandable that this situation was tolerated while the respected Queen Elizabeth II lived; rather less so with her eldest son.

Unlike his brother Andrew, Charles at least leaned on people to solicit money for his charities rather than for himself, but this brought him into unwise contact with everyone from Gulf potentates to a former Nazi and his steadfast refusal to listen to advice might have landed him in more embarrassing trouble than it has.

The now Mr Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor gets a chapter to himself for his improprieties, now grown so egregious that even the royal family has had enough of him. If the king had died before breeding we would have had the appalling prospect of King Andrew I.

Although Charles III made allusions to a slimmed down monarchy there has been little sign of it and certainly no financial slimming down. Those hoping William V might be a radical moderniser will, Baker suggests, be disappointed as he has been even more secretive than his father about royal finances.

Helicopters, priceless art, valuable stamps, historic buildings and much else are provided to them with public money.

One might expect a cash-strapped government to clamp down on these practices but a combination of ancient conventions and knee-jerk deference means MPs never seriously debate royal finances, though the Public Accounts Committee's new inquiry into the Crown Estate may cast some light.

As Baker shows, opinion polling indicates declining public support for the Windsors, and an alternative model is there in the very slimmed down and informal monarchies of western Europe.

Entitled: The Rise and Fall of the House of York

by Andrew Lownie
William Collins 2025
£22

Before he turned to royal biographies, Andrew Lownie wrote about Britain's intelligence services, and he reports that he found the spies far more cooperative than he has ever found the royal family.

It's not just that many people in the know won't talk, it's that papers are kept secret and can be destroyed on a whim. This eye-opening biography of the aristocrat formerly known as Prince Andrew has been overtaken by events since it was published and can now be found on sale at a healthy discount, but it remains an impressive monument to research against the odds.

Andrew's spoilt childhood (very different from that of his older brother), fraught marriage, shady business involvements and friendships with Jeffrey Epstein and Ghislaine Maxwell are all dissected, and every claim appears well sourced. In interviews Lownie talks of being forced to leave things out by the lawyers and promises fresh revelations to come.

We get no strong sense of what Andrew is like as a person, perhaps because he lacks a coherent character – Lownie suggests his life has been bedevilled by the difficulty of deciding when he's a prince and when he's a normal person. Or as one young woman put it more picturesquely after a weekend house party: "One minute you're having your bum pinched and the next minute he's reminding you he's Your Royal Highness".

The picture Entitled paints of the royal family, with members leaking against each other to the press, is not an appealing one. Andrew's role – he ceased to be needed once his brother had fathered two healthy children – is particularly unenviable, which makes you conclude that Harry did well to get out when he did.

Recent events in the United States have made us realise the virtues of a parliamentary system. Despite a thumping Conservative

majority, the Commons forced two inadequate prime ministers out of office in the autumn of 2022, but it remains to be seen whether the US still satisfies Karl Popper's pragmatic definition of a democracy – a country in which it is possible to remove a leader without violence. That uncertainty also makes a constitutional monarchy more attractive, but the reader still comes away from Lownie's book suspecting it's not only Andrew who needs to grow up a bit. When it comes to our reverence for the royals, we all do.

Jonathan Calder

Cover-Up. 2025 documentary) by Seymour Hersh

Seymour Hersh is the Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist who uncovered the My Lai massacre during the Vietnam War and the Abu Ghraib torture scandal in Iraq, both committed by the US Army.

In the documentary, Hersh comments that as he researched My Lai, he learned that a similar massacre occurred the same day only a mile away. In other words, bayonetting babies was just another day in Vietnam, not the "one bad apple" event described by

the military establishment.

Now 88 years old, Hersh continues to pick at the scab of the American conscience. The documentary shows that there has always been an unpleasant and mean undercurrent in America, represented by the silent majority who found nothing wrong with My Lai or Abu Ghraib.

Instead, they hate Hersh for countering the myth of America the Sheriff, keeping order in a chaotic world. The Trump administration's contempt for morality and international norms is nothing new: Trump simply voices the feelings of an alarming number of US citizens.

Hersh's ability to find people willing to whistle-blow is admirable, and the consequence of a remarkable work ethic as well as bravery and 'moxie' (a Yiddish word for nerve, cheek, audacity). Hersh has occasionally stumbled: he thought Bashar Assad would bring reform to Syria (so did many others in the early 2000s). Hersh also fell for fake letters between President Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe, sensing he might have a lucrative story. Yet, he admits his faults, his commitment to revealing the truth about governments and corporations undimmed by the swamp of lies and corruption he uncovers.

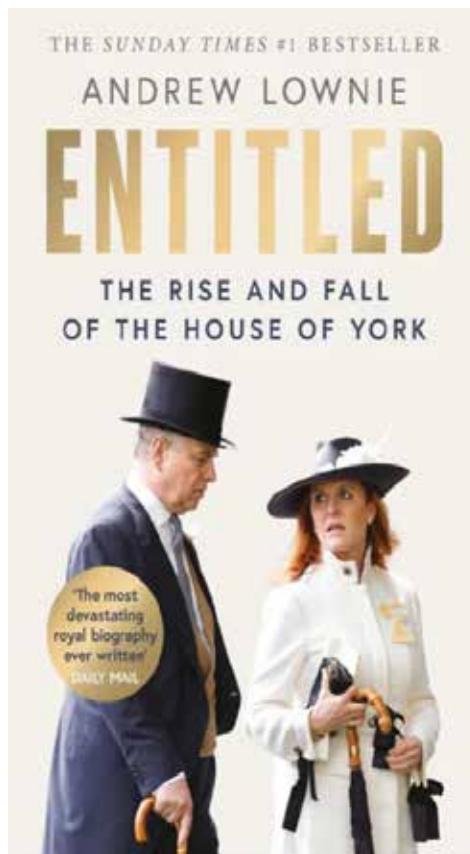
Rebecca Tinsley

To The Success of Our Hopeless Cause, the many lives of the Soviet Dissident Movement

by Benjamin Nathans
Princeton University Press 2024

Why are books on the late Soviet period such door-stoppers? The answer is that there is so much to be recorded in the hope that lessons be learnt and it might never happen again, though the photographs at the end tell us that Comrade Putin is little different to the red tsars who preceded him.

Back in the dark days of the 1970s the Young Liberals became interested in supporting Soviet dissidents, the young Vladimir Bukovsky particularly catching their imagination, though there were many others whose names I now forget – members of Baptist



churches with no political axe to grind, in particular. YL branches were encouraged to elect Bukovsky and/or others as their president and to write to the Soviet embassy requesting his attendance at AGMs and the like.

I don't suppose these invitations, birthday cards etc. ever reached them; did they have any impact on the person handling the post at Kensington Palace Gardens? Probably not.

We didn't know much about these people – a duplicated A4 page and perhaps a flyer from Amnesty International. It was indeed Amnesty's dialogue with the dissident movements of the Soviet Empire that honed much of their modus operandi in the 1960s and 1970s. So, the blow-by-blow details of the careers of Bukovsky et al are quite an adventure story and quite gripping as such; I hope Nathans doesn't think it belittles his work to describe it as a page-turner, it will certainly be put to more serious use in PhDs to come.

One area that remains fertile is the history of the nations of the Russian empire post-1945. I was aware that it took the Red Army a good decade to pacify Ukraine, even longer in Lithuania it turns out.

Bukovsky was finally released and expelled to the West, but like Solzhenitsyn found his celebrity status waned.

The 1975 Helsinki Accords weren't worth the paper they were printed on, I think small groups such as ours hoped for more from them than certainly our governments were committed to (if anything). To some extent the KGB put up with dissidents while they were internal and with little impact but when they interacted with foreign agents, they became a threat and were rapidly shut down in one form or another. Thus, by the time of Gorbachev they were largely forgotten, a small number even served under Putin in his earlier days.

Nathans thinks that because the Communist Party monopolised the body politic of the Soviet Union there was a lack of civic institutions for the dissidents to relate to, hence their attempt to make Russia live by its stated constitution.

He quotes Alexander Zinoviev, expelled from Russia in 1979: "Because of their way of life, the

overwhelming majority of citizens in a communist society feel no need for civil liberties and precisely for this reason they don't have those liberties."

I regret and I have argued with Russians, albeit living comfortably in Latvia, who say don't interfere in politics, get on with life and politics won't interfere with you. At the other end of the scale, I encountered members of the Latvian community in my home town who said that they did not vote because it was something that just communists did. Not voting was an expression of resistance to Russian occupation and they had brought for habit with them to England.

Extrapolate this to the present, opposition to Putin's war against Ukraine, even in its most neutral forms is suppressed, gaol or worse. Holding up a blank poster or pretending to hold up a poster can get you arrested. Putin has gone full circle back to Stalin.

Stewart Rayment

The Quiet That Remains - Survival, silence and the story of a Ukrainian family

by Ben Skliar-Ward
Otter Stream Press

To understand the Ukrainian conflict one has to understand Ukraine's tragic history, and "What remains when history passes over the ordinary".

Russia's invasion in 2022 is the latest of many invasions, many other wars; the word Ukraine means borderland, and borderlands are transient places.

"Ukraine's history is one of interruption. Every time its people began to shape a future, larger forces intervened. Imperial Russia, Soviet rule, Nazi occupation - and now modern Russia - each sought to claim the land and silence its people."

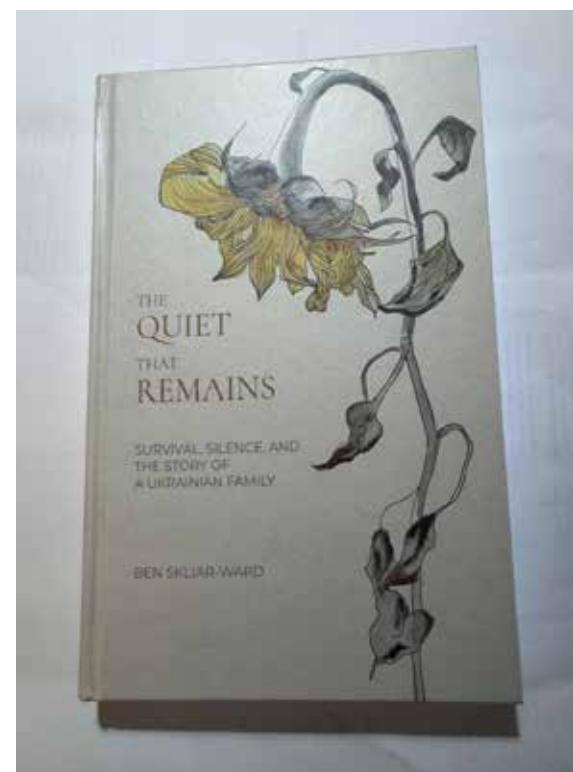
When Skliar-Ward opened a suitcase, forgotten in the back of a cupboard - 'the' suitcase which many exiles and refugees will recognise

- he found photographs, letters, diaries, wallets, the tangible proof that connects one generation to its distant others. "What emerged was a window into how Ukrainians navigated the twentieth century from the underside, through bureaucratic compliance, adaption and cultural persistence".

The contents of this suitcase inspired The Quiet That Remains, which follows the broad arc of Ukrainian history through the lives of his Ukrainian forebears; the suffering, famine, wars, revolutions, torture and repression, and finally exile, which engenders the quiet that remains, the silence of disconnection, despair and survival.

Skliar-Ward's book begins with an excellent short history of the country from the 9th century to today, including that of the era of the Cossacks who held sway from the 16th to the 18th century. His family are descended from Cossacks. Even after Russian control was established in the 19th century, to be a Cossack meant something, recalling a status even after their conferred rights had disappeared, and is still part of Ukrainians' identity today.

It is in the 19th century that the author's own family come into focus, and their history and that of Ukraine's intertwine. "They were Psalmists, bookkeepers, villagers, exiles. Ivan Skliar prayed aloud



from memory, when the prayer books (and the Church) were gone."

His son Viktor's wife was killed in a Soviet air raid on what was Nazi occupied Ukraine. Victor was in turn a student psalmist, a fighter for Ukraine, a Soviet conscript, an agricultural bookkeeper during the great hunger, the Holodomor, and then during Nazi occupation, and finally an exile. One of his sons, Wsewolod went with him into exile; his other, Vladim, stayed and made his life in the Soviet Union.

The Holodomor, the great famine of the 1930s, was brought about by Stalin's aggressive collectivisation campaign. Whilst the Skliars survived the Holodomor, the book records the horrific testimonies of others who did not. The famine shattered communities. Life in the Soviet Union did not return to normal when the famine ended; it was swiftly followed by Stalin's Great Terror and then the Nazi invasion. The ending of that occupation and the return of the Soviets meant retribution, not liberation - no distinction was made between coerced labour and collaboration. Having endured famine, conscription, the bombing which killed his wife, Viktor decided to leave. Nothing was left of his Ukraine - church, family, nation. And he as not alone; by 1944, perhaps 500,000 Ukrainians made the desperate journey west. He and Wsewolod travelled through Europe, through the transit and forced labour camps, to Austria by the April of 1945. The Skliars were now 'displaced persons', two among the nearly three million Ukrainians stranded in Europe.

The Soviet Union wanted the Ukrainians back, and nearly two million did return. But by modifying his documents to change his birthplace to Poland, Viktor and his son managed to stay in a Ukrainian displaced persons camp until March 1948, when the Skliars arrived in Harwich and a new beginning.

Life in post-war Britain was hard enough for the British. It was a miserable era of cold, rationing, austerity, bomb sites, a grey uncertainty. But the British had family, friends, familiarity with how the country worked, its culture and traditions; Viktor and Wsewolod had none of these, nor, as displaced persons, any

choice about where to live and what career to follow. But they survived, flourished and started a new family, bringing with them their legacy of Ukrainian poetry, language, recipes, history, and the silence they kept to survive - "(the) silence becoming its own form of legacy"

Skliar-Ward's blend of history with his familial, personal connection makes his narrative more intensely real, and anchors more firmly it in the reader's mind. "The Quiet That Remains" is an excellent and important book for any of us who are trying to help Ukraine and put this current war into perspective.

Wendy Kyrle-Pope

Sanctioned, the inside story of the sale of Chelsea FC by Nick Purewal

Biteback 2025 £20

In February last year, Roman Abramovich's name was heard once again on the Stamford Bridge terraces. BlueCo has never really cut it with the fans. Since 2022 Chelsea have probably spent more money than any other team worldwide, but without the tangible results that fans crave; the long game doesn't seem to be working, how early do days have to be?

Abramovich had taken Chelsea through 17 major trophies in his nearly 20 years; five Premier League titles, two Champion's Leagues, five FA cups, three League cups, two Europa Leagues, a FIFA Club World Cup and a UEFA Super cup.

The hindsight of history tells us that Abramovich's attempts to broker peace early in Russia's invasion of Ukraine did not stand a chance. It is improbable that a Russian oligarch would not have links to that Vladimir Putin, real politic must have demanded it, but what was the forensic evidence beyond the baying of the small men in Westminster?

The British public lead the government in our response to Ukraine; flags everywhere, Boris Johnson knew which way the wind was blowing. These same Tories had previously embraced the arrival of oligarchs on British soil. The Daily Mirror reported (on the publication of this book)

that following his sale of Chelsea, Abramovich was ordered to send £2.5bn of the proceeds to aid Ukraine.

But as it stands, that amount remains in a UK bank account, with the government now threatening to sue the 58-year-old. Pureval says Abramovich himself instructed an unequivocal statement confirming that Chelsea was for sale, in full, we have all the proceeds to be donated to the victims of Ukraine war.

My focus here is football, And there is no doubt that Abramovich has been a good thing for the game, not only for Chelsea. The politics, that's a different matter, Abramovich is named in the Navalny 35 and is sanctioned by many western governments. Back to the ball, this is too good a story for me to reveal any more; enjoy.

Saeed Rahman

Monday

Having risen early, I spy a party of Well-Behaved Orphans trudging across the muddy fields. Christmas is not a hectic time on the old estate like the potato harvest is, but there will still be work for them to do. It is gratifying that the Liberal Democrats have endorsed my 'Farm First' scheme as a model all should follow. Equally, as someone who comes from an ancient family and owns many farms, I am delighted that our opposition to the 'Family Farm Tax' has borne fruit. I hear on the aristocratic grapevine that the Duke of Buccleuch is pretty chuffed too.

Tuesday

To the Alexandra Hall Hall Hall for the Christmas party I hold every year for the village children and Well-Behaved Orphans – ginger beer flows like vintage champagne and I insist on trying every cake to make sure it's up to snuff. The afternoon's entertainment is provided by a strangely familiar magician. Then it hits me: it's Kwasi Kwarteng! He, you may recall, was Chancellor for several days under the reign of that strange, pixie-looking woman who jumped ship to the Tories when Conference refused to support her motion saying she should be Queen. Unfortunately, Kwarteng proves no more adept as a prestidigitator than he was as custodian of the nation's finances. In attempting to retrieve a rabbit from his hat, he sets fire to the stage; and as he runs about in a panic, his trousers fall down. Fortunately, the youth of Rutland are of stronger mettle than Old Etonians: a stream of ginger beer is directed at the heart of the blaze, and the WBOs form a human chain to bring pails of water from the pond. The consensus among my young guests is that it has been the best party ever, so I hurry to book the rather singed Kwarteng for next year.

Christmas Eve

I do not regard Christmas as having properly begun until I hear the piping voice of a choirboy tackle the opening verse of "Lloyd George Knew My Father". As usual, the Service of Nine Lessons and Carols at St Asquith's is a triumph, and my enjoyment of it is only enhanced by the presence in the pew behind me of Cook's rich contralto. I hear her urge choirs of angels to "sing in exculpation", learn that "the holly bears a pickle" and harmonise with her when the organist strikes up "In the Beith Midwinter". As to the lessons, Wera Duckworth reads from the work of that great Liberal L.T. Duckworth; William and Jim Wallace read Graham Wallas; and I tell the joke about Roy Jenkins and the lavatory brush that once had me set down from the SDP's rolling conference train at a signal box outside Sherburn in Elmet.

Christmas Day

There are those in the House who regard having two peerages as swanking, but I was still happy to invite Earl Russell (but Not His Big Band) for Christmas – there he is enjoying a joke on the stairs with the cheese heiress Paris Stilton and Sister Sid, the penguin rescued by Danny Chambers who discovered a vocation while secreted at the Convent of Our Lady of the Ballot Box in High Leicestershire. (The sisters will be holding their own notorious shindig as I write these words – I shall be

Lord Bonkers' Diary

along presently.) Freddie and Fiona are expounding their views on health policy to a rapidly diminishing audience, while our economics spokesperson Daisy Super holds court in the Orangery. The Wise Woman of Wing is forecasting forthcoming council by-elections with her Tarot pack, Bobby Dean is crooning "White Christmas" and Freddie van Mierlo is sketching allcomers in chalk. Only Meadowcroft seems in low spirits: I know he is impatient for spring to come, as he loves to get his dibber out.

Boxing Day

The bare winter fields. The snifter from the hip flask. The glorious movement of man and horse as one. The hound music. Yes, I love hunting. Traditionally in Rutland we hunt not foxes but Trotskyites, but they are rare indeed these days, what with climate change and the loss of habitat. So this Boxing Day I am following the lead of some of my neighbours and hunting Reform UK activists instead. I realised I had them on my land when I came across flags and empty cans of Dahrendorf lager in one of my coverts. The sport is not good – they are much less fit than were the Trotskyites – but the swift denouement does allow time for further snifters.

Saturday

Looking back over 2025, I remember with particular pleasure the November evening when the Well-Behaved Orphans insisted upon putting Nick Clegg's principles into practice. Earlier in the year, Clegg had told everyone he had a right to take every writer's and artist's work without paying, so the WBOs decided, quite reasonably, that they must have a right to take Clegg's work. Thus it was that I found myself on the roof of a local branch of Featherstones with an expert on burglar alarms recommended by old associates of Violent Bonham Carter, one of the more spry WBOs and a length of rope. The aforementioned orphan was then lowered head-first through a skylight so that she could retrieve the shop's copies of Clegg's magnum opus one by one. In the interests of completeness, I must record that after her fellow orphans had tried reading them, they were all for returning the books the following evening.

Sunday

Back to St Asquith's – I ought to get a season ticket what? – and then, after sherry with the Revd Hughes, to the Bonkers Arms for a pre-lunch stiffener. I find the talk is all of Freddie and Fiona and what they were saying at my Christmas Day party. Word has got about that they were talking about "privatising health" and it has Not Gone Down Well – we happen to be very proud of our cottage hospital. Worse than that, a garbled version of the story has reached Rockingham Forest in which they want to "privatise elf", and you can just imagine how that was received by the local elves. So F&F would be well advised to lie low for a bit. As my old friend Violent BC might have put it, it would be a pity if anything happened to them.

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