

YOUNG TURKS OR YOUNG BERKS?

The newly published Orange Book promises to reclaim Liberalism but lacks a human spirit, says Simon Titley

Hold on to your hats. A group of leading Liberal Democrats has written a book with no pictures in it. And it may spark a serious debate. I have long bemoaned the lack of intellectual life in the party and yearned for it to publish something a tad weightier than a yellow baseball cap. Is this the answer to our prayers?

The Orange Book has attracted interest for two reasons. Controversially, it advocates a return to 'economic liberalism'. And the authors include most of the likely contenders to succeed Charles Kennedy as party leader, with the notable exception of Lembit Öpik – presumably his article about asteroids was omitted for reasons of space.

The title 'Orange Book' invites comparisons with the famous 1928 Yellow Book, written by such luminaries as Keynes and Beveridge. This is a bold intellectual claim and a high standard to match. It's one thing to write a collection of essays on policy, quite another to claim, in effect, that one's book is a seminal work. And the book's subtitle 'Reclaiming Liberalism' begs the question: reclaim what from whom?

The Orange Book should be judged not merely as an intellectual work, but also as an exercise in power. The Liberal Democrats are in the middle of an attempted putsch, of which the book is an integral part. The curious thing about this right wing plotting is that it enjoys little or no grassroots support in the party, and has not attempted to win any. It is an elite project focused on the parliamentary party and its strategy is top-down.

The title of a fringe meeting at this month's party conference, organised by right-wing ginger group Liberal Future, gives a flavour; 'What the Lib Dems need is more discipline and less diversity'. Provoke a civil war and then accuse your opponents of 'rocking the boat' – now where have we seen that tactic?

Despite David Laws's claims that the Orange Book is not a manifesto, Liberal Future's website is already brandishing it as some sort of holy text. Given the recent intrigue and testosterone-fuelled ambition, the book should be seen not so much as an invitation to debate, more a statement of intent.

An ideological row within the Liberal Democrats was inevitable. There are essentially three competing strands of thought – left libertarians, social democrats and economic liberals. But the intellectual contradictions of the 1988 merger were never satisfactorily resolved – indeed, debate was actively discouraged, leaving an ideological vacuum.

Just what is Liberalism? The starting point for all liberals is that liberty is the norm. The onus is on those who wish to govern or regulate to justify it. But the mistake economic liberals make is therefore to assume that liberty is defined solely by an absence of government and regulation.

It was this deficiency that social liberalism addressed. Social liberals in the late 19th and early 20th centuries developed a philosophy that rejected the atomistic individualism and empiricist assumptions of classical liberalism. They saw that civilization is based on a complex web of shared agreements

about how we behave toward each other. They argued the case for a positive view of freedom, which recognised that people need access to such public goods as education and healthcare if they are to enjoy genuine liberty.

More recently, Bernard Greaves and Gordon Lishman, in 'The Theory & Practice Of Community Politics' (1980), refreshed this definition of Liberalism:

"Our starting point is the individual. We want to find ways of enabling and encouraging each person to fulfil his or her own potential. We believe that men and women have an immense, largely unrealised capacity for self-direction, self-cultivation, self-understanding and creativity. The ultimate obscenity is to reduce people to the status of objects: to be led, manipulated, directed, discarded.

"Our goal transcends political theory: it is an idea of human independence in which each, individually precious, human being has the liberty and the opportunity to experiment, to experience, to learn and to influence his or her surroundings. This is the libertarian, rationalist, participative tradition of liberalism.

"This kind of liberty is not egotistic individualism. It is not about having one's own way: it is about having a way that is one's own. A society based upon liberty is also based upon responsibility and inter-dependence. It requires a framework which guarantees liberty and supports inter-dependence. It is in community that mutual and individual responsibility operates. It is in interaction with others, in community with others, that the framework is fashioned and the guarantees freely agreed."

At the heart of this Liberal philosophy is recognition of the innate human need for 'agency', the ability to influence and change the world in which one lives. Liberty is threatened when powerful people monopolise agency for their own benefit and force less powerful people to fit in with their selfish purposes and arrangements.

The issue is not whether power resides in the public or private sector; rather, how any excessive concentration of power should be broken up and made accountable. Liberals believe that things should serve people rather than people serve things. More than this, Liberals value the human spirit and believe there is higher purpose to life than economic activity.

The lack of human spirit is the biggest failing of the Orange Book. Its (mostly male) authors see people primarily as economic actors, approaching life in terms of desiccated financial calculations. Have they never experienced the joy to be alive?

The book begins with an enthusiastic foreword by Charles Kennedy, yet it is doubtful he actually read it. On the eve of publication, he must have had second thoughts because he paged his MPs instructing them not to comment to the press.

The introductory essays by the editors, Paul Marshall and David Laws, set the tone. At the heart of their thesis is an idea of 'the fall'. At some point (variously described as either 50 or

100 years ago), Liberals diverged from the path of true righteousness. They moved away from ‘economic liberalism’ – and this is what the authors wish to reclaim.

But there is confusion about whom to blame. The editors seem anxious to reassure their readers that they have not abandoned social liberalism and, in places, quote Green, Hobhouse, Keynes and Beveridge with approval. Elsewhere, however, these thinkers are singled out as the culprits.

Another alleged culprit is the ‘nanny state Liberal’. I am no fan of nannying measures about, for example, smoking or obesity. Yet Laws has an odd concept of what constitutes the ‘nanny state’, at one point disparaging environmental concerns about cars and cheap flights. Given the potentially calamitous effects of global warming, it is facile to identify unlimited driving or flying as a fundamental human right.

The editors’ blind spot is the threat to individual liberty posed by corporate power. They see the state as the only real danger. Yet we live in an age when, of the 100 largest economies in the world, over half are private corporations rather than geographical sovereign states. And the Orange Book was published in the same week that Conrad Black was accused of ‘corporate kleptocracy’.

The remaining essays are a mixed bag. They begin with Ed Davey’s argument for ‘localism’. The principle of devolution is fine but many of Davey’s proposals for reinvigorating local government are half-baked or excessively managerial. What is missing is a practical vision of how civic society can be revitalised in fragmented communities.

Nick Clegg’s essay on Europe has been unfairly travestied as ‘Euro sceptic’. His premise is that, in the UK, there is a war between two extremes, Euro sceptics versus uncritical pro-Europeans. To win back public trust, Liberals must locate a middle ground of critical pro-Europeanism. Though Clegg’s suggestions for EU reform are sound, I don’t buy his premise that there has been a cacophony of uncritical pro-Europeanism. Euro sceptics have had it their own way while Europhiles have been timid and apologetic. As I argued in *Liberator* 296, Euro scepticism is a manifestation of a deeper psychosis, which EU reform proposals, however worthy, do not address.

Chris Huhne’s essay is the best in the book. He is the one author to address the threat to liberty posed by corporate power and the dominance of the USA. His analysis of the future of multilateralism is perceptive and his suggestions for reform are appealing. The one serious weakness is that he does not explore the international political dynamic necessary to deliver the reforms he advocates, so one is left with mere wishful thinking.

Vincent Cable’s essay on deregulation and public services is the least orthodox in Liberal Democrat terms, and the most controversial. Cable is not against regulation per se but he clearly wants a lot less of it. He acknowledges that regulations address many legitimate public concerns, from racial discrimination to fire safety and data protection. To reconcile these concerns with his goal of less regulation, he proposes replacing highly prescriptive regulation with a simpler ‘general duty’. The drawback of this approach is that it would lead to a considerable rise in litigation, as the courts are asked to rule on what a ‘general duty’ entails.

Cable’s suggestions for dealing with EU over-regulation are plain silly. At no stage does he explain how he would build an alliance within the EU. Instead, all he has to offer as a political strategy is some table-thumping “UK obduracy”.

Susan Kramer’s essay on environmental regulation implies she favours replacing regulation with market forces. However, it turns out that Kramer isn’t really against regulation at all. Rather, she is looking for the most effective psychological tricks that will encourage people to comply, and her model is the London congestion charge.

David Laws returns with a controversial essay proposing the replacement of the NHS with a system of social insurance. Unlike most Liberal Democrats, I think Laws is basically right. I have experienced the public health systems in Belgium and France, both of which are superior in quality and based on a system of social insurance. But there are barriers Laws does not recognise. You can provide meaningful choice only if you increase spending to create sufficient surplus capacity. The Belgian system of ‘mutuelles’ is rooted in a Catholic culture of social solidarity, which does not exist in Britain. And you need a strong degree of local control. None of these things is impossible but all would require a fundamental culture change, a long period of gestation and a lot more money. I have no idea how Laws proposes to get from here to there.

Mark Oaten’s essay on crime starts well but goes rapidly downhill. He begins with the view that criminal and anti-social activities diminish the liberty of individuals. This is a refreshing and distinctly Liberal take on crime. But then he spoils it with a set of proposals for prison reform, which, amongst other things, advocate denying release to any prisoner who has not learned to read and write. This has not been properly thought through.

Oaten has a thing about appearing ‘tough’. Is he afraid David Blunkett will kick sand in his face? The consequence is that he focuses on prisons and fails to consider the wider context of why crime occurs in the first place. Also, in identifying the serious problem of the fear of crime, he fails to deal with the role of the media in stoking up fears unnecessarily.

Given the hostility of the two editors to the ‘nanny state’, the most startling essay in this volume is Steve Webb’s. He addresses the moral panic about poor parenting with a proposed slew of heavy-handed state interventions. Instead of meddling in family life, Webb might be better advised to challenge his ‘economic liberal’ friends about the laissez-faire policies that cause social dislocation in the first place.

The final essay is a piece by Paul Marshall on pensions. He correctly identifies the problem of the demographic shift, which is making traditional state pension systems unsustainable. However, he fails to answer the basic problem of how you persuade the middle classes to spend less on consumer goods and instead save for their old age.

What is the problem with the Orange Book? It is inadequate to criticise it simply on the grounds of being ‘right wing’. Its basic fault is that it is suffused with spiritual poverty and a grim economic approach to life. Despite the focus on economics and the claim to be ‘radical’, it does not challenge the prevailing orthodoxy that we must work and consume ever more, even though current patterns of work and consumption are unsustainable. Nor does it acknowledge the ruinous worldwide effects of unregulated western consumerism. In its analysis of threats to liberty, it routinely favours business interests over those of the individual citizen.

It would be nice to think that this book, however much one may disagree with it, will provoke some overdue debate within the Liberal Democrats. But if its editors’ purpose is simply to fire a broadside in their fraternal war within the parliamentary party, it will only perplex and disillusion the membership.

In the early sixties, Jo Grimond was once a guest at the White House. JFK showed him a copy of the 1928 Yellow Book, the margins annotated in Franklin D. Roosevelt’s handwriting. It had helped inspire the ‘New Deal’ programme. Somehow, I can’t see the Orange Book having the same influence.

Orange? I’d say it’s more of a lemon.

Simon Titley is a member of the Liberator Collective.