

AN ALTERNATIVE NEW YEAR LETTER

Did Ming Campbell's New Year Message fire you with enthusiasm? If not, Simon Titley provides an alternative version designed to put lead in your pencil

Be honest. When the e-mail from Ming Campbell titled 'New Year Message' arrived in your inbox on Boxing Day, did it inspire you for the coming year? Or did it feel more like leftover turkey?

When Ming first became leader, heckles from Labour MPs in the Commons chamber compared him to 'Compo' (the character from the long-running TV sitcom, *Last of the Summer Wine*).

When I opened Ming's e-mail on Boxing Day, another sitcom character sprang to mind: Sergeant Wilson from *Dad's Army*. The message seemed to say, "Would you awfully mind taking part in this, er, campaign about crime, if it's not too much trouble?"

If it's not too much trouble, may I humbly suggest this alternative New Year Message?

“DEAR MEMBER,

Happy New Year to each and every one of you.

For me, 2006 has been a year unlike any other. To coin a phrase, it has been my *annus horribilis* (no jokes, please).

It began with my predecessor found in the gutter (metaphorically speaking), followed in short order by another colleague indulging in practices relatively unknown in East Fife. If we hadn't won the Dunfermline by-election, our party would have been up the brown tributary without a means of propulsion.

Rumour mongers accused me of being Charles Kennedy's 'assassin'. If only that were true. I might have shortened the party's agony.

I inherited a party that was shell-shocked and seeking stability. In retrospect, I was too keen to mollify opinion and avoid any further upsets. I ended up sounding like the boxer who, in the words of the song, was "afraid to throw a punch that might land."

The statement I made on 1st December about the future of Trident typified that approach. It was mealy-mouthed, unconvincing and a flabby compromise, and I regret issuing it.

I've reflected and decided to make some changes. The result will be that life may not be as comfortable as some of you had hoped. But we will never become a party of government if our motto remains 'safety first'.

A CLEAR BRAND

If I manage to achieve only one thing during my tenure as leader, it will be to give the party a clear brand image. The

problem at the moment isn't that the party has the wrong brand. It is that the party has no brand at all.

Until now, the party has deliberately avoided creating one. It has believed that any and all voters are potential supporters, and that to create a clear image might put some people off.

No wonder we issue so many Focus leaflets. It's because we have such little bedrock of loyal support and must therefore campaign for all our votes afresh at each election.

No wonder the number of Lib Dem councillors hasn't increased significantly since 1995. We're treading water and we must raise our game.

The clear image we need isn't difficult to find. It's pretty obvious when you think about it. It's a theme around which the party can unite. And it's something that will resonate with large sections of the population.

At its simplest, it's about giving people what social scientists call 'agency', control over their lives. This aim will be at the centre of our campaigns.

Our enemy is 'giantism', a problem as bad in the private sector as it is in the public sector. People are sick of cloned High Streets, impersonal call centres, factory hospitals and remote bureaucracy.

Giving people control over their lives and communities should inform all our domestic policies. And it should also inform our campaigning style.

I'll be working with the ALDC to revitalise community politics. Instead of our local activists knocking on doors and saying "we'll do it for you", I want to see our local activists empowering people to do things for themselves.

TRIDENT

The announcement I made on 1st December to the effect that no decision need be made about Trident until 2014 may have been strictly true. But it was also a cop-out.

And the suggestion that we should halve the number of warheads in the meantime is a complete irrelevance.

Everybody knows that the only reason Trident has become an issue now is because Tony Blair wants to leave a 'legacy' before he resigns as prime minister.

No one seriously believes that our country any longer needs Trident or anything remotely resembling it. I know that. If you are honest, so do you.

There is no conceivable circumstance in which such a weapon would ever be used. It is not 'British', it is not 'independent' and it is not a 'deterrent'.

There was a time when such weapons had a military logic. During the cold war, when our country faced a nuclear threat from the Soviet Union, I reluctantly accepted the need for a deterrent of our own. In those days, I believed that, were we to get rid of our nuclear weapons, it should be through multilateral rather than unilateral disarmament.

But the Cold War ended 16 years ago. It is no longer a question of 'multilateral' versus 'unilateral'.

I am not so naïve as to believe that the end of the Cold War has delivered a 'peace dividend'. Far from it. Our country and its allies face real threats to their security. But Trident provides no defence against any of these threats, while our armed forces go short of vital equipment. My aim is not a cut in defence spending but a better bang for our bucks.

If we really do need a nuclear deterrent in the future, there are far cheaper delivery systems than submarines costing billions of pounds each. For example, we could strap a thermonuclear device to the roof of one of my old Jaguars – probably about as effective and a damn sight cheaper.

I want military value for money, not useless and expensive status symbols. That is why I shall be the first party leader to break cover and declare against the replacement of Trident. Let's see David Cameron cap that.

WE CAN CUT CRIME

One of the worst things about the Blair government is the way it tailors its policies to the prejudices of the tabloid press. Of course, the Daily Mail won't like my stand against Trident. That's really the only reason some of our MPs daren't say in public what they really feel about the issue. So if you think opposing Trident is daring, wait till you hear my next proposal.

Our party should campaign for the decriminalisation of drugs. Yes, you heard right.

I'm supporting this policy not on libertarian grounds but on pragmatic grounds. Because it's the one thing that will do more than any other to reduce crime. And it will also go a long way to defeating the Taliban.

The so-called 'war on drugs', launched by Richard Nixon over 35 years ago, has not just failed. It has actually made the situation far worse. Politicians have unwittingly created a multi-million dollar criminal industry.

Much of the surge in crime we have experienced in recent years has been caused by people stealing to pay for their expensive drugs habits.

The problem is essentially an economic phenomenon, so that's how we should deal with it. Drugs should be decriminalised rather than legalised – I have no wish to see crack cocaine as part of a 'buy one get one free' offer in Boots.

Instead, I shall propose that drugs be made available to registered addicts under medical supervision. Addicts would gain access to a supply cheaper and purer than they can buy in the pub car park, and the drug pushing industry would collapse. By registering addicts in this way, we can begin to offer long-term treatment to wean them off drugs altogether.

A nutty idea? No, most chief police officers and many professionals in the field already support a similar policy as the best way of tackling the drugs problem and reducing associated crime.

And there's more. I mentioned the Taliban. Most of the heroin that enters Britain originates in Afghanistan. NATO's policy of attempting to destroy opium poppies is also pushing Afghan farmers into the arms of the Taliban. No wonder. This crop is the only way many of them can make a living.

At the same time, the world's pharmaceutical industry is desperately short of therapeutic morphine. So I propose that, instead of destroying the poppies, we create a legitimate market by enabling Afghan farmers to sell their crops to the pharmaceutical industry (fair trade and organic, of course).

Every previous attempt to pacify the Afghan people by force of arms has failed. Creating a thriving economy might just do the trick.

THE ENEMY WITHIN

Since I became leader, I have been repeatedly advised that the best way to cement my leadership is to stage a 'Clause Four Moment' at the party conference. The idea is that I should emulate Neil Kinnock by taking on and defeating some of our party's members.

At first, I was hesitant to go along with this strategy of manufactured rows. But I have come to realise that it might have some value. Our party does need a 'Clause Four Moment'. And the people I intend to take on and publicly defeat are those who keep banging on about the need for a 'Clause Four Moment'.

Do you know the basic problem with these people? They are angry about the wrong things.

There are more than enough things about which to feel genuinely angry. I am angry about the deceit that led to the Iraq war. I am angry about global warming. I am angry about the looming pensions crisis. I am angry about third world poverty.

But I cannot for the life of me get angry about the fact that there are people within our party with differing views who enjoy healthy democratic debate. And I have no desire to see our party poisoned by witch-hunts and purges.

Stamping out dissent is not what our party is about. Indeed, our party needs more democracy, not less. The biggest internal mess I have had to sort out since I became leader is the assortment of scandals and dubious practices in our party's fundraising. We got into this mess because power was removed from elected committees and handed to unaccountable bodies and individuals.

I shall therefore ensure that all our party's financial affairs are subject to proper scrutiny by our democratic structures. We regularly prescribe greater democracy and openness for the country. Well, physician, heal thyself.

With every best wish for the year ahead.

Yours sincerely

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Sir Menzies Campbell

Now, don't you feel better already?

Simon Titley is a member of the Liberator Collective
