

# THE RIGHT STUFF

## When is it right for the Liberal Democrats to expel members for their views, asks Simon Titley

What are the ideological criteria for membership of the Liberal Democrats? The preamble to the party's constitution sets out a broad credo, but when do a member's beliefs move beyond the pale and justify expulsion?

Stoke Lib Dems think they know the answer. They recently suspended local councillor Gavin Webb for his libertarian views, which include, for example, a belief that drink driving should not be an offence unless a driver has actually killed or injured someone.

Without getting into the rights and wrongs of that particular case, the fundamental issue – the basic values of the party – is too important to be resolved by one local association. If the party is to declare right-wing libertarianism incompatible with its aims and purpose, it is a decision that should be applied consistently.

A political party needs a clear set of guiding principles otherwise it has no point. But the necessary criteria require fine judgement. They should be broad enough for the party to be electable, but not so broad as to be meaningless. They should be precise enough to supply definition and direction, but not so narrow that they turn the party into a small and impotent sect.

A common core of beliefs provides a party with more than a community of interest. Ideological coherence supplies an intellectual rigour to guard against superficiality. But this safeguard was drastically weakened in the 1990s. The 'end of ideology' assumed the basic political questions were settled and all there was left to argue about was efficient management. The Liberal Democrats made things even worse for themselves. They made ideological debate taboo, for fear the merger might unravel. Meanwhile, community politics had degenerated into an obsession with electoral tactics, based on a conviction that the party could advance solely by exploiting local grievances. So the Liberal Democrats have avoided creating a sharp image. They cannot make the hard choices necessary to create one because, for every strategic option, there will always be an MP or councillor who can claim, "It won't work on my patch".

Given the Liberal Democrats' fuzzy image, it is hardly surprising that all manner of people imagine the party supplies a blank canvass onto which they can project whatever beliefs they wish. Around 1999/2000 in particular, there was good reason to assume an ideological vacuum. The wheels had fallen off 'the project' and Charles Kennedy had become party leader, inaugurating a period of drift. The emergence at that time of a new right wing was due less to an outbreak of intellectual endeavour, more to the party seeming as though it were up for grabs.

The upshot was the publication of the *Orange Book* in 2004. Instead of establishing a new intellectual hegemony, however, it provoked a resurgence of social liberal thought,

notably last year's *Reinventing the State*. The *Orange Book* effectively ended the party's moratorium on ideological debate, something only the right could have done (on the 'Nixon to China' principle), though one suspects this outcome was not what the book's editors had in mind.

The party's right wing is not monolithic but comprises three competing strands; libertarians, authoritarians and economic liberals. They range from serious thinkers who are worth listening to, even though you may not agree with them, to boorish willy-wavers who revel in juvenile intrigue. But which would pass the Stoke test?

Since the late nineteenth century, the major ideological schism among those claiming to be 'liberal' has been between classical liberals and social liberals. The fundamental disagreement is over what constitutes freedom. Classical liberals emphasise negative rights, believing that the only real freedom is freedom from coercion. Social liberals support not only negative rights (freedom to) but also positive rights (freedom from). They believe that real freedom can exist only when citizens are healthy, educated and free from dire poverty.

The Liberal Democrats belong firmly to the social liberal tradition. If in doubt, consult the preamble to the party's constitution, which includes an unambiguous statement of positive rights ("no-one shall be enslaved by poverty, ignorance or conformity") and an explicit acknowledgement of an active role for the state in enabling citizens to attain freedom. To belong, it is not enough simply to lay claim to the word 'liberal'. A common purpose is more than a label; it is a shared sense of what individuals and societies should live for and die for. Which of the three ideological strands on the Liberal Democrat right share the values expressed in the preamble?

Right-wing libertarians are clearly incompatible. They condemn any attempt to address social injustice through political means as 'coercion'. They believe people may act on society only through individual acts of buying or selling. They believe the only threat to freedom comes from the state. They measure freedom in terms of isolation from other people.

The curious thing about libertarians is that, like imaginary characters in a computer game, they are abundant in cyberspace yet scarcely exist in real life. They are predominantly young single men who have withdrawn from society and lock themselves away in their rooms with their computers. The political blogosphere is plagued with libertarian 'trolls' posting comments at all hours, with an intensity possible only for Billy no-mates who spend most of their time online. The anti-social values of libertarianism clearly appeal to those with no social or family life.

Was the Stoke decision correct? Up to a point. Libertarians do not belong in the Liberal Democrats but are

not worth the trouble of expelling. Despite all the noise they make in cyberspace, there are few of them in the party and none exercise any serious influence. Better that they recognise the logic of their position and leave voluntarily. Better still, they should switch off their computers now and again, get out more often and learn something about (non-virtual) society.

As for the second category of right-wingers, authoritarianism is the antithesis of liberalism. The variety on offer here is not a coherent ideology but a series of temperamental spasms on the theme of ‘toughness for the sake of toughness’, like a political equivalent of Tourette’s syndrome. No wonder it has never caught on in the party.

This grouping would probably not exist were it not for Gavin Grant, one-time Svengali to Mark Oaten. Back in the 1980s, he nicknamed his clique the ‘Phalange’ and his politics have not moved leftwards since. Most people who are out of sorts with their party would seek a more congenial political home but Grant seems to think the party is out of sorts with him. The Oaten camp’s repeated demands for a ‘Clause 4 Moment’ and the oxymoron of ‘tough liberalism’ should be understood in this context.

Quite apart from any moral or philosophical objections, authoritarianism makes no strategic sense, since it would repel the party’s core support while appealing most strongly to the older, uneducated white working class, the demographic group least likely to vote Lib Dem. And

herein lies a clue. The most congenial home for Grant’s politics would be the right-wing of the Labour Party, specifically the sort of labourism represented by David Blunkett and John Reid, characterised by a visceral disgust for ‘namby pamby’ and ‘airy-fairy’ liberals. But how would the authoritarians fare in the Stoke test?

It is not worth the bother because this faction is essentially a one-man band.

What of the third strand, the economic liberals? As David Howarth usefully points out in *Reinventing the State*, differences have been exaggerated because of a confusion between ends and means. Most economic liberals within the party actually tend to the social liberal rather than the classical liberal tradition because they share the goal of social justice. This implies redistribution, something a true classical liberal would not accept. The difference is that economic liberals express a preference for market mechanisms as a means of achieving social justice. In so doing, they have sometimes provided a helpful corrective to the social democratic reflexes bequeathed to the party by David Steel.

Whether economic liberals belong in the party is not the issue. The problem is an attachment to outmoded fads. For nearly thirty years, British politics has been governed by the ‘Thatcher settlement’. Most of the basic policies implemented by the Tories in the 1980s were accepted by New Labour. Before Thatcherism, there was Butskellism, in which most of the Attlee government’s settlement was accepted by subsequent Tory administrations. That consensus also lasted about thirty years.

Both doctrines were the product of prevailing social and economic conditions. Butskellism arose from the hardships of depression and war, while Thatcherism arose from changing material aspirations. There is a risk here of

historical determinism. Neither Butskellism nor Thatcherism was inevitable but both successfully captured the *Zeitgeist*. But despite their dominance, neither consensus has ever represented a definitive political wisdom or an eternal verity.

Butskellism’s symbolic end was 1979’s winter of discontent. Thatcherism is likewise reaching the end of the road, as a rampant financial sector creates its own winter of discontent. The ‘credit crunch’ and ensuing recession have left people feeling angry and increasingly insecure. For the first time in living memory, a younger generation faces the prospect of a lower standard of living than that enjoyed by its parents.

Given that British politics is about to undergo a sea change, it would be a tragedy if the Liberal Democrat right were to wed the party to a dying ideology. Advocating a blind faith in markets was never a smart idea – markets should be seen as a tool, not an object of religious devotion – but it would be a disastrous course of action now, because it prevents the party communicating righteous anger about the way people’s dreams are being turned to ashes. When even Vince Cable is calling for tighter regulation, the game’s up.

Clinging on to the Thatcher settlement resembles the mistake made by the Liberal-SDP Alliance in the 1980s, when it tried to resuscitate Butskellism. Back then, David Steel and the Gang of Four were doing the political

equivalent of asking us to dance to their Alma Cogan records. Now, it would seem that Jeremy Browne and his ilk are demanding we groove to Spandau Ballet.

Thatcherism is over. The Liberal Democrats must decide whether they want to influence what replaces it. Nothing is certain about what will come next. As the recession deepens,

politics might coalesce around right-wing populism; a diet of protectionism, anti-Europeanism and persecution of minorities. Or concerns about social breakdown might generate a consensus around a compulsory communitarianism, economically leftist but highly conservative on social issues.

Or it could be something else entirely. It could be us. In *Liberator* 325, David Boyle sketched out what this new vision might be. It would mean placing human values at the centre of our politics and opposing giantism in both the state and private sectors. This is a distinctive vision that only the Liberal Democrats can offer. It could command widespread support, and would act as an antidote to the alienation so many people now feel.

We are at a pivotal moment in our politics that comes along barely once in a generation. The danger is that the Liberal Democrats miss the bus because right-wing ideologues want to turn the clock back twenty years, while many other members continue to insist that the answer to every problem is to deliver more leaflets. The party should focus on addressing that danger rather than follow Stoke in expelling misfits. If the party were to establish a clearer identity, any misfits would be less likely to join it in the first place.

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