

BARE BONES

The Bones Commission has recommended changes to party management, but internal structures are the least of the Liberal Democrats' worries, says Simon Titley

“We trained hard, but it seemed that every time we were beginning to form up into teams, we would be reorganised. I was to learn later in life that we tend to meet any new situation by reorganising, and a wonderful method it can be for creating the illusion of progress while producing confusion, inefficiency, and demoralisation.”

This quotation, often falsely attributed to the ancient Roman satirist Petronius, probably has more recent origins yet it will provoke a weary sense of recognition among anyone who has endured an internal reorganisation.

Not that reorganisation is necessarily bad. Internal structures are not sacrosanct and reform is sometimes required. Circumstances alter, different needs arise and, even without external change, there is a tendency in the long run for systems to ossify and activity to become ritualised.

Even so, reorganisation should be approached with caution. There is always a temptation to tinker and, unless any changes have demonstrable benefits, the practical result risks becoming the waste of scarce time and resources.

Managerialism limits the imagination. The Liberal Democrats' management structure, the current focus of reform proposals, is by no means perfect and could undoubtedly be improved, but it is not a primary barrier to the party's electoral success and its reform will not in itself guarantee such success.

The fundamental problems of the party are political and strategic. To be fair to Chris Bones's Reform Commission, it had a limited remit to review the party's organisational effectiveness and it has commendably stuck to that remit. Had Bones strayed into more fundamental areas of party strategy, the outcome could have been incendiary.

The trouble is the premise underlying the decision to set up the Bones Commission. The assumption seemed to be that the solutions to the party's problems are essentially managerial. Bones was asked to devise a structure for implementing a strategy without there being an obvious political strategy in the first place. The stated target of winning 150 seats is just that; a target, not a strategy.

To make matters worse, the Commission's terms of reference were larded with hideous management jargon straight out of the FT's Martin Lukes or the Dilbert cartoon strip. The exercise was to be “future focussed” and talked of “stretch goals” and “step change”. Anyone who writes that sort of language without irony should be taken out and shot.

What sort of ‘step change’ can we expect from Bones? The party has not been told. The Times (16 July) leaked a few of the conclusions, but in terms that suggested the

existing party constitution is hamstrung by its old Liberal inheritance and would be improved by being remodelled on the SDP's more centralised system. This tendentious claptrap at least provides a clue to the source of the leak. Otherwise, party members are none the wiser and the Bones report has yet to be released to them.

Perhaps prompted by the leak to the Times, Nick Clegg wrote a short piece on the Liberal Democrat Voice blog extolling the virtues of the proposals but without telling readers what any of these reforms actually were. The secrecy extended even to the party's Federal Executive, which was asked to approve the key Bones proposals at its meeting on 14 July without prior sight of the report. This cloak- and-dagger business suggests a chronic lack of trust.

Elsewhere in this issue, RB provides more details of the actual Bones proposals and, as one would expect of such an exercise, they are a mixed bag. But the most striking feature is an obvious dissonance between the centralising prescriptions of Bones and the party's basic political critique, that power is too concentrated.

I was reminded of Michael Cockerell's recent TV documentary series, *Blair: the Inside Story*, in which it emerged that Tony Blair could not understand why the cabinet should have any say over major government decisions. His ‘command and control’ style reduced the cabinet to a cipher because he believed that consultation was an obstacle to getting things done.

Likewise, Bones implies an impatience with democracy and consultation, presumably on the assumption that fast decisions are necessarily better decisions. But if the Liberal Democrats believe that centralisation leads to wasteful, inefficient, bureaucratic and remote government, what makes anyone imagine that the outcome will be any different inside the party?

The answer is, of course, the self-interest of the people who ‘know’. The template was created thirty years ago with the relationship between David Steel and Richard Holme. Since that time, a changing cast of self-appointed *nomenklatura* has hovered around successive leaders, claiming to know what is best while treating ordinary party members and internal democracy with contempt.

It is an arrogance that leads inevitably to the idiotic theory that the leader must establish his ‘strong’ credentials by taking on and defeating his own members, hence the succession of stage-managed ‘back me or sack me’ debates at party conference. Assuming Bones is debated at this September's conference, one fears the same old, same old.

This elite's finest hour was undoubtedly the failed attempt to persuade Charles Kennedy to drop the party's opposition to the Iraq war. The people who ‘know’ have

proved time and again to be a wet blanket. And this leads us to the party's basic problem, excessive caution.

The biggest danger the Liberal Democrats face at the next general election is of being blanded out. You would have thought that Iraq would have taught the party that there are electoral dividends from taking bold and distinct stances. But no, conventional wisdom dictates that the strategy must be to try and finesse New Labour and the Tories in 'triangulating' on the same Daily Mail-reading voters.

Bones is largely beside the point. The party's deficiency is less organisational than testicular; it is not policy per se but the lack of vigour with which it is expressed. The party is risk-averse. It is all too fond of adopting policies, only to express them in mealy-mouthed terms. As a result, the party neither enthuses its base nor challenges its opponents.

The recent launch of *Make it Happen*, an opportunity to sound more courageous, illustrated what is wrong. The language is a clue. The platitudes that accompanied the launch of this document simply won't wash. Simon Hoggart (Guardian, 18 July) reminded readers that "if the direct opposite of something is clearly ludicrous, there is little point saying it in the first place" and helpfully provided some examples.

"We want to make Britain fairer!" (We want to make Britain more unjust). 'We need a tax system that offers transparency, clarity and a level playing field!' (We need a fiscal system that is obfuscatory, incomprehensible and biased towards the rich). 'You've got to be clear about taking the tough choices!' (We are hunting for easy, short-term options). 'The Liberal Democrats will put people first!' (We will value people less than the big corporations)."

And the emphasis in the tax cut proposals was wrong. Jonathan Calder put it well on his *Liberal England* blog: "My worry is that he [Clegg] is wrong in announcing his headline figures before he knows what spending cuts he wants to make. He has got it, as our American cousins might put it, backasswards.

"What he should have done was to emphasise the Lib Dem war on surveillance, centralisation and state control – in short, large chunks of the New Labour project. Then he could have said something like: 'Look, if we scrap ID cards and all these quangos and databases, we will save billions of pounds and be able to cut your taxes.'

"That, I think, would have proved popular. By announcing the tax cuts first and then saying we shall hunt for spending cuts to fund them, he makes it easier for our Labour opponents to paint us as a hard-faced party that wants to run down public services."

Or consider Europe. This has been the classic example of the Liberal Democrats lacking the courage of their convictions. The party's 2004 Euro election campaign was a disgrace, with members instructed not to mention Europe but to focus on local issues, resulting in a dismal fourth place behind UKIP. The party's Campaigns and Communications Committee, meeting on 16 July, decided to run a less parochial campaign in 2009 but how courageous will this campaign prove to be?

Make it Happen mentions Europe but focuses on the promise of a referendum, a sop to Eurosceptic opinion. It

doesn't confront people with the key question: who do you want to lead the world? Should it be Europe with its federal system, independent countries and voting safeguards to prevent any group taking too much power? Or will we be nothing more than followers of the USA, taking our orders from Washington?

Or consider civil liberties. The party has opposed 42 days detention without trial for terrorist suspects, but would it have the balls to express a gutsy civil liberties campaign with a similar tone and content to that of the online magazine Spiked's action plan 'Slash 42 days to 24 hours' (www.spiked-online.com/index.php?site/article/5359)?

"The biggest danger is of being blanded out"

The Liberal Democrats need reforming but internal structures are a second order issue. The priority is a culture change, which boils down to these six elements:

- **Narrative** – A clear narrative that explains what the party is for (see David Boyle's articles in *Liberator* 319 and 325) – a politics rooted in human values and meeting people's need for agency.
- **Moral clarity** – The forthright expression of the party's values, not inhibited by the brutal fact that one cannot attract without also repelling.
- **Difference** – Politics implies the existence of alternatives. The party must provide voters with a real choice, by standing up for what it believes in rather than joining in the Lab-Con consensus.
- **Change** – The goal is to change society for the better, not trim according to the latest poll or focus group. The aim is to change public opinion, not accept it as a given.
- **Targets** – A national campaign that cements the allegiance of those demographic groups most likely to support the party (principally the younger, better-educated, more cosmopolitan). We cannot win everywhere.
- **Involvement** – Steps to arrest and reverse the decline in party membership, based on a recognition of how people have changed and what enthuses them. Respect not contempt for the members the party still has.

The party can 'streamline' its organisation all it wants. But any revamp that is purely organisational can be overwhelmed by the tide of nationwide opinion trends. If the party enters the next general election campaign with its current poll ratings (around 18%), it will do well to retain its current tally of seats. Only if a strong national profile has propelled the party into the mid-20s are significant gains on the cards. But if the party is polling in the low teens (as it was last autumn), a haemorrhage of seats is inevitable, regardless of who sits on what committee or how many candidates have been put through an 'academy'.

The most reliable guide to the number of seats the party can expect at the next election is the spread betting market. These shrewd punters currently anticipate around 48 seats, a net loss of 15. It will take a good deal more than the restructuring of committees to change that outlook.

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