

NUANCED TO DEATH

‘Make it Happen’ is more evidence that the Liberal Democrats are fatally risk averse, argues Simon Titley

Political strategy. It’s not difficult. Answer these four questions, in this order: What is the party for (purpose)? Who is the party for (beneficiaries)? What action should the party take (priorities)? What resources does the party need to achieve its objectives (means)? If your answers are rational, you have the basis of a coherent strategy.

Make it Happen, launched by the Liberal Democrats on 17 July, is not a strategy document but it reveals a good deal about what the party imagines its strategy to be.

The document has been variously described as ‘a statement of the party’s vision and values’ or a ‘pre-manifesto’. It was launched amid much rattling of tambourines within the party, but if it sets your pulse racing, you really should get out more often. *Make it Happen* is simply dreadful. It is dreadful mainly because it commits the cardinal sin evident in most of the party’s communications: it is inoffensive. It is governed by an overriding desire to please everybody. It is nuanced where it should be pithy, contrite where it should be assertive, consensual where it should be controversial. The rhetorical phrase du jour among the party’s leadership is ‘tough choices’, yet this document displays a marked reluctance to take any (not unless you count the cynical introduction by stealth of a new tax policy).

As I never tire of arguing, one cannot attract without also repelling. The party should have learnt that by now. The Liberal Democrats possess reams of policies but just about the only one that has had any significant effect on the party’s vote is opposition to the war in Iraq. This policy had an impact because it was controversial at the time and distinct from what the other parties were saying.

Likewise, the only Liberal Democrat MP who consistently achieves good media coverage is Vince Cable. Why? Because he makes statements that are not only authoritative and concise but also bold. He is not afraid to tell some home truths. Only recently has it become accepted wisdom to talk of a recession. Cable was unfashionably warning of that danger more than two years ago. He predicted that the mortgage and credit binge would end in tears, and he was doing so uninhibited by the Daily Mail arguing that ever-rising house prices were an Englishman’s birthright.

But *Make it Happen* fails to be distinctive. Its conciliatory tone lacks passion; a more accurate title would be ‘Make it Happen (if that’s alright with you)’. Worse, it is being touted in some quarters as a ‘narrative’. Read David Boyle’s articles (Liberator 304 in particular, also

319 and 325) to grasp why it is not. If the party thinks it has ticked that box, boy are we in trouble.

Make it Happen also suffers from the problem identified by Ros Scott (Liberator 327): that a desire to sound like a ‘party of government’ produces worthy but dull policies. The party is under the illusion that, to sound serious, it must sound ponderous. The Liberal Democrats have grown out of being a party of protest and should aspire to being a party of government. They have forgotten that, in making this transition, there is a vital intermediate stage; to learn how to be a party of opposition. Hence the lack of a killer punch.

The flaws in *Make it Happen* are consequently not an isolated drafting error but symptomatic of the party’s ills and can be traced back to a failure to answer adequately the four basic questions listed at the beginning of this article (a failure that is nothing new and which has existed throughout the party’s history).

WHAT IS THE PARTY FOR?

The party must have a sense of purpose, a point to its existence. That purpose is to put its philosophy into practice. This philosophy – Liberalism – stems from an idea of what life is for. Each person has only a few years on this planet and, in the limited time available, most seek to live a good life. But because each of us has a unique personality, only one person can decide what constitutes a good life, and that is ourselves. However, we cannot make those decisions unless we possess ‘agency’, the ability to make real and meaningful choices about our lives. That is the logic underlying our belief in liberty. The party’s central purpose is therefore to enable everyone to determine their own lives.

This philosophy is controversial. It is popular in some quarters and not in others. But that is only to be expected. Politics implies the existence of alternatives. Liberals should have something distinctive to offer in the marketplace of ideas and not assume that everybody is amenable to their messages. Indeed, if they are forthright in the expression of their values, Liberals will meet outright hostility, particularly from powerful people who seek to monopolise agency for their own selfish ends, or from those who believe that the individual’s overriding duty is to obey authority or tradition.

Of course, the party should not express the concept of ‘agency’ in abstract or academic terms in its everyday statements. But the idea should be evident as a consistent thread running through its values, policy and communications. And it is an idea that resonates with many people. There is a growing sense of alienation and

insecurity, social bonds are disintegrating, lives are becoming dislocated, and people feel that nothing they say or do makes any difference.

Does *Make it Happen* express such a consistent thread? Not really. There are repeated references to the need for politicians to “listen” but is this really the problem? Far from politicians not listening, they have never listened more. In the 1950s, most MPs put in only token appearances in their constituencies, while local councillors were never seen from one election to the next. Yet electoral turnouts and party memberships were at an all-time high. Nowadays, most elected politicians conduct regular surgeries and carry unprecedented loads of casework; they are accessible online via e-mails, websites and blogs; they deliver leaflets and appear regularly in the local media; and they conduct frequent surveys and polls. It is impossible to move without bumping into some politician or other wanting to “feel your pain”. Yet people still moan that politicians are “out of touch”.

There is obviously a widespread sense of powerlessness and a real problem of alienation, but given all the listening that is going on, it is not clear that more of it is the solution. Might the real problems lay deeper? Might the problem be centralisation and gigantism, in both the public and private sectors, which move all the important decisions out of people’s hands? Might the problem be the replacement of significant political choices with trivial consumerist ones? Might the problem be the replacement of social relationships with economic relationships, leading to a loss of social solidarity? Might the problem with politicians be their unwillingness to offer moral leadership? Might an honest analysis of why society is atomising be too radical for some people in the party to stomach?

And if there is an overriding need to reconnect citizens to the democratic system, why stress, as *Make it Happen* does, a bizarre policy to reduce the House of Commons by 150 MPs, which would increase the number of voters in each constituency by about 30%? Why 150? Why not 83 or 237? 150 sounds like a figure plucked out of thin air to appease the anti-democratic sentiments of the tabloids.

Worst of all, *Make it Happen* is suffused with the tired old promise that the Liberal Democrats, unlike the other parties, will fix everything for you. There is no recognition that the inability of politicians to meet everybody’s demands is at the root of popular dissatisfaction with the whole democratic process. If the party seriously wants to make it happen, it must stop treating voters as supplicants, admit that politicians can’t solve everyone’s problems, and declare that empowerment means people must get off their arses and contribute to society rather than expect merely to consume.

WHO IS THE PARTY FOR?

No matter what values they espouse or policies they adopt, each political party will tend to benefit some people and disadvantage others. The Liberal Democrats, whatever they like to think, are no different.

From the 1920s to the 1970s, the Liberals were in the wilderness precisely because they lacked an interest base. This heritage has left the Liberal Democrats with a marked objection to the idea of being partisan, of being defined by sectional interests, expressed in the ridiculous slogan, “We can win everywhere”.

The party refuses to acknowledge that its values and policies are consonant with the interests of some people

rather than others, but the voters understand. The results of recent elections, polls and surveys show where the Liberal Democrats’ natural constituency can be found: among voters who are younger, better educated and more cosmopolitan than average (my articles in *Liberator* 308 and 322 explain why).

Despite this, the party made an eccentric decision to pitch its 2005 general election manifesto at the elderly, the demographic group least likely to vote Liberal Democrat. It made no difference. The party still performed best among voters aged under 35 (out-polling the Tories among 18-35s) and worst among those over 65.

Make it Happen suggests where the Liberal Democrats have chosen to make their pitch at the next election. It is that old chestnut, the ‘hard working family’. The phrase actually used is ‘ordinary families’ but it amounts to the same. It is code for the ‘centre ground’ and can mean only one thing; the party intends to compete with Labour and the Tories on the same narrow, crowded territory. Such convergence is a disastrous strategy because it prevents the party saying anything distinctive. It is a sure-fire recipe for being blanded out.

There are other unpleasant ‘dog whistles’ in *Make it Happen*. In the section headed “Why have we lost our sense of community?”, where one might have expected a more cogent analysis, the key policy highlighted in bold text is a proposal to introduce “proper border checks”. Meanwhile, the only policy mentioned relating to the European Union is a call for a referendum. The stress laid on these two policies suggests a desire to appease xenophobic UKIP voters rather than enthuse the party’s base. This cheap bid will impress no-one. It indicates a chronic lack of confidence in the party’s values.

OTHER QUESTIONS

As for the remaining two of the four questions in the opening paragraph, here’s an executive summary of the answer: Testicles. Acquire some.

In the meantime, we are faced with a conference debate on *Make it Happen*. The motion has been contrived to be virtually unamendable. There will likely be no real debate, just a succession of second-rate PPCs competing to rattle their tambourines the loudest. But the inevitable vote of approval will be a pyrrhic victory.

Presumably the Liberal Democrats wish to revive democratic politics. But *Make it Happen* wills the ends without the means. A revival of real politics is not possible without fighting a battle of ideas over competing visions of how to organise society. *Make it Happen* is hamstrung by its reluctance to criticise the prevailing consensus of economism. Instead, we have a flaccid collection of nuanced platitudes engineered by the right-wing PR men surrounding the leader, whose first instinct is to extinguish the fire in the party’s belly lest it offend the Daily Mail or Daily Express.

Make it Happen lacks vigour, rigour or risk. Gerald Kaufman once famously described Labour’s 1983 manifesto as “the longest suicide note in history”. This pre-manifesto is merely the sound of a party quietly sticking its head in the gas oven and hoping no-one will notice.

Simon Titley is a member of the *Liberator* Collective
