

NOW WE CAN

The Liberal Democrats can profit from the political crisis only if they understand its true causes, says Simon Titley

The MPs' expenses scandal abruptly changed the prism through which we view politics. The previous issue of *Liberator* (no.333) went to press just before the scandal broke. By the time the magazine hit the streets, it was offering readers a window on a lost world of G20 demonstrations, academies and women's rights – the big topics we used to debate in a dim and distant past.

The scandal is having an extraordinarily cathartic effect on British politics yet we need to be careful interpreting what it represents. The political crisis is about much more than MPs' expenses. Taken in isolation, the expenses are petty by any global standard of political corruption. No-one has got rich through these abuses and no political favours have been bought. So we must ask why this scandal has touched such a raw nerve.

The scandal has manifested a deep public hostility towards politicians but it is not as if they have suddenly fallen from grace. Polly Toynbee (*Guardian*, 22 May) reminded us that "Britain has always held its politicians in low esteem" and noted: "In the summer of 1944, during the Normandy invasion, surely the nation was proud of its leaders? Not really. Gallup had the effrontery to ask what voters thought of their politicians, and even then only 36% thought them to be acting for the good of the country, while 57% thought they acted only for their own or their party's interest."

The financial crisis has given the expenses scandal added traction. People whose jobs and homes are on the line are less likely to forgive the use of public funds to clean moats or buy trouser presses. Yet curiously, it is the fripperies costing a few quid that seem to have generated greater public anger than the five-figure sums spent on second homes.

NO PANACEA

This is certainly a political crisis but it is not necessarily a constitutional crisis. There are constitutional aspects; for example, abuses of the expenses system have been more prevalent among MPs with safe seats. But electoral reform, though desirable, is not a panacea. Countries with PR electoral systems, such as Belgium and Israel, have recently suffered political crises every bit as acute as Britain's. The crisis is an opportunity for constitutional reform – which the Liberal Democrats should seize with both hands – but this will not supply a complete solution. The more limited suggestion that procedural reforms of parliament are the answer is an even less adequate or imaginative response.

The call for constitutional or procedural reform begs the question: what problem are you trying to solve? Without a clear idea of the purpose of democratic politics and some clear political objectives, such reforms will amount to little more than reorganisation for its own sake. Cleanliness and

transparency are necessary and laudable aims but should be seen as a secondary practical matter, not the be-all and end-all of politics. The real issue with parliament is why it so rarely engages in genuine and vital debate but instead has degenerated into a legislative sausage machine.

The worst response of all, though, is the self-abasement being indulged in by some politicians. "My hair shirt is hairier than yours," they claim in an attempt to ride mob sentiment. This undignified behaviour loses rather than wins respect because it presumes untrustworthiness on the part of politicians. It risks reinforcing the public perception that politics itself is no longer worthwhile. It plays into the hands of the anti-democratic forces seeking to diminish the powers of our elected bodies.

CRISIS OF LEADERSHIP

Rather than assist those trying to demonise politics, the way to gain public trust is to reinvigorate the moral authority of our democratic process. Because, at heart, this is a crisis of leadership. The underlying problem is that most of our politicians no longer stand for anything. As columnist Mick Hume pointed out (*Spiked*, 12 May), "MPs today are not gangsters. But they are not great leaders either. Many of them are pretty useless jobsworths. Statesmen of standing have survived far more dangerous scandals because people still believed in them and what they stood for. By contrast, the authority of today's politicians can be destroyed by a scandal over the petty cash, because in the absence of any great cause or fight for the Good Society, many can see them only as parasites and placemen."

Our political life has been hollowed out. People complain "they're all the same" because politicians no longer engage in the sort of debate that would make them distinguishable. The resulting vacuum is filled by personality issues or fringe parties.

The loss of public trust has been intensified by the increasing isolation of politicians from the people they are meant to represent. Political scientist Peter Mair observed (*New Left Review*, issue 42, Nov/Dec 2006): "Citizens retreat into private life or more specialised and often ad hoc forms of representation, while party leaderships retreat into institutions, drawing their terms of reference ever more readily from their roles as governors or public-office holders. The traditional world of party democracy – as a zone of engagement in which citizens interacted with their political leaders – is being evacuated. Citizens turn from being participants into spectators, while the elites gain more space in which to pursue their own shared interests."

Politicians are no longer willing to offer leadership but are nevertheless eager to appease the public via the mass media to win re-election. Unable to distinguish between being a representative and a suck-up, they resort to 'spin', which is what happens when all communication must

sound attractive. The replacement of authentic with contrived language was satirised brilliantly in the TV sitcom *The Thick Of It*. A jaded shadow minister complains to the trendy spin doctor giving him a makeover that he is unsure whether his party still plans to lock up yobbos. “Maybe I missed a memo from you. Maybe I should understand yobbos now, not even call them ‘yobbos’, call them ‘young men with issues around stabbing’.”

Winning back the public’s trust requires purpose and clarity. But where is the leadership when you need it? Mick Hume (Spiked, 6 May) asked: “Whatever happened to the old saying ‘Cometh the Hour, Cometh the Man’? Our hour of need certainly seems to have arrived – indeed we appear to have been frozen in it through these past months of capitalist crisis. Yet the Man, Woman or party who might have a clue how to lead us out of it is still notable by their absence.” He added an important caveat: “Not leadership in the shape of some ‘strong man’, but a political vision of where we want to be heading and how we might try to get there.”

So the Liberal Democrat response to the crisis should be to do what the party always should have done: stand for something by offering a clear, distinctive and resolute political vision. Assorted naysayers made constant excuses why the party couldn’t do this, but all the timid and conservative assumptions that constrained the party have been swept away. What were these obstacles to the party having the courage of its convictions?

Obstacle no.1 was the assumption that deep political reform – always high on the Liberal wish-list – was ‘boring’ or ‘only for political obsessives’. The order went out from Cowley Street to stick to bread-and-butter issues. People don’t care about politics, we were told, only the chattering classes do. Whatever the case in the past, people certainly care about it now.

Obstacle no.2 was the assumption that the Thatcherite economic consensus was here to stay. Following the ‘end of history’, there was no longer any point engaging in ideological debate. Rising house prices and easy credit made people feel rich, so criticising the system would be an assault on their ‘aspirations’. Now neoliberalism is finished (and a useful by-product is that the party’s right-wing is on the ropes), so the field is clear for a real debate.

Obstacle no.3 was incrementalism, the electoral strategy championed by Chris Rennard. This approach subordinated policy to short-term tactical considerations. The belief that ‘we can win everywhere’ prevented the party saying anything controversial for fear that someone somewhere might be offended. Now, Rennard’s imminent departure as Chief Executive has opened up the possibility of a culture change in the party.

With these obstacles removed, how should the party proceed? It could start by consigning last year’s pre-manifesto *Make it Happen* to the shredder (see my article in *Liberator* 328). This shameful document was drafted with an overriding concern to avoid giving offence. Its apologetic and conciliatory tone betrayed a failure of moral leadership. It was intended to appease a ‘middle ground’ but, now that ground has disappeared, the document has lost any point it might have had.

“*A crisis is a terrible thing to waste*”

Economist Paul Romer famously said, “A crisis is a terrible thing to waste.” This crisis is a time for a revival of real politics, which means fighting a battle of ideas over competing visions of how

to organise society (so giving voters a real choice), not trying to converge on the same ground as our opponents. This is no time for caution and restraint or a loss of nerve. It is not the time for ponderous, 80-page green papers or risk-averse, wishy-washy proposals. It is not the time for vacuous ‘spin’ or hackneyed references to ‘struggling families’. The Liberal Democrats need to go into the next general election with a passionate, hard-hitting, uncompromising, radical manifesto. And the party could build such a platform by making this September’s party conference a showcase for radical policies.

The Liberal Democrats should be offering moral leadership by providing bold and inspirational answers to the big questions. Whereas Barack Obama’s message of hope was “Yes we can”, ours should be “Now we can”.

We were afraid to propose deep political reforms in case we were seen as irrelevant obsessives. With the political system discredited – now we can.

We were afraid to propose radical alternatives to Thatcherism in case we were seen as opposing people’s aspirations. With the economic system discredited – now we can.

We were afraid to propose strong civil liberties in case we were seen as ‘soft on terrorism’. With New Labour’s avalanche of laws and ID cards discredited – now we can.

Now can Nick Clegg? Last November, he was interviewed for *Total Politics* magazine by Shelagh Fogarty. She reported: “I’m pleased when he offers me a biscuit from an endearingly old-fashioned biscuit barrel. My heart sinks when I see what’s inside. Rich Tea. Very disappointing and austere. I’d have expected at least a Bourbon from the debonair Mr Clegg. A man’s choice of biscuit says a lot about him. He takes it in good humour when I declare ‘Grim biscuits!’ But he fights back. ‘Austere? No way. They’re a vintage, a classic.’ ”

That really is taking the biscuit. Politically speaking, we’ve had too much bland Rich Tea from Mr Clegg. But at the time of writing, Nick has opened his biscuit barrel to reveal the Jammie Dodger of opposition to Trident. In May he hinted he might have some Amaretti biscuits of pro-Europeanism. Now we need to see the Custard Cream of social cohesion, the HobNob of thriving local economies, the Fig Roll of fighting poverty, the Ginger Nut of tackling climate change, the Garibaldi of civil liberties and the Wagon Wheel of giving power to the people.

“Carpe the f***ing diem” was the terse message from blogger Felix Cohen in his recent ‘open letter to the Lib Dems’ (<http://openlettertothelibdems.net>).

Now we f***ing can.

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