

# I CAN'T GET NO ANTIS FACTION

## The Social Liberal Forum holds its first conference in June. Will it look to the future or the past, asks Simon Titley

Is the Social Liberal Forum necessary? In a members-only poll published recently by Liberal Democrat Voice (30 April), 64% described themselves as 'social liberal' and only 35% as 'economic liberal'. Isn't the battle already won?

The Liberal Democrats have always been overwhelmingly social liberal. The preamble to the party constitution makes this clear, giving equal weight to positive and negative freedoms. This tradition long predates the merger; the Liberal Party had been social liberal ever since Joseph Chamberlain installed his first municipal drainpipe.

But an unrepresentative minority is subverting that tradition. Since the late 1990s, the party's social liberalism has been challenged by a succession of right-wing caucuses and ginger groups, boosted by the totemic *Orange Book*. Despite having no democratic mandate, this movement has gained considerable power over the party.

SLF is a belated response to this trend but there are two dangers. The first is that creating a faction might inadvertently reposition the party's mainstream ideology (i.e. social liberalism) as a fringe view. The second is that merely reacting against right-wing intrigue risks ignoring the need for a positive vision. These dangers define SLF's first two tasks.

### POSITION AS MAINSTREAM

Task no.1 is to reassert that social liberalism is the mainstream view within the Liberal Democrats. The *Orange Book* alleged it was "reclaiming liberalism"; SLF has a better claim and should damn well make it. But it is not SLF's job to try and restore a *status quo ante*, despite the nostalgia of some former SDP members for the post-war consensus. Circumstances have changed. SLF must refresh social liberalism to address the future, not hanker after the past.

### A POSITIVE VISION

Task no.2 is to develop a positive vision, a distinct and coherent idea of the sort of society we wish to live in; not a utopia but a sense of direction and a source of inspiration. SLF cannot do this if it looks at issues in microcosm. It must enter the realm of big ideas.

The main challenges facing society – such as climate change, the global financial crisis, the atomisation of society, the breakdown of trust in our democratic institutions – demand a 'big picture' outlook. We need politicians with the vision to address these deep problems, but most of them have retreated into a world of uninspiring managerialism and banal soundbites. We need grown-up political discourse, but it has been trivialised by the media's tabloid values and poisoned by the abusive rage of online comment.

This situation demands fundamental change. SLF

claims to be 'radical' but it can be truly radical only if it argues for such change.

### AN IDEA OF FREEDOM

Task no.3 is to articulate a distinct idea of freedom, since that is what the party's internal ideological argument is basically about. All liberals claim to stand for 'freedom' but they cannot agree what it means. Social liberals reject the classical liberal view that freedom is merely an absence of restraint. They believe that freedom consists of both 'freedom to' and 'freedom from' since, to enjoy freedom, people need the practical ability to exercise it.

To help win this argument, SLF should define freedom in terms of 'agency', which means the capacity of individuals to make meaningful choices about their lives and to influence the world around them.

Agency is a useful concept because it forces us to think of freedom as a practical ability rather than a theoretical abstraction. It gets to the heart of the matter, the distribution of power. Most political problems can be traced to an unwarranted concentration of power, where powerful people monopolise agency for their own selfish ends or deny it to others. An insistence on agency counteracts the classical liberal view that market forces are the only legitimate means by which people may exercise power, since markets have only a limited capacity to provide agency. Democratic association is the only power most individual citizens have to stand up to giants.

### AN IDEA OF THE ECONOMY

Task no.4 is to develop a coherent idea of the economy, as a distinct alternative to the neoliberal ideology that dominated politics for the past thirty years. Fortunately, someone has already done the spade work. In their ALDC booklet *The Theory and Practice of Community Economics*, David Boyle and Bernard Greaves built on the ideology of community politics by extending its application to economics.

Their central idea is that the economy exists to serve people rather than the other way round. "In a democratic society," they argue, "the role of politics is to enable its citizens to determine their political, social, environmental and cultural objectives; economics is the mechanism for achieving them."

After thirty years of excessive reliance on the City, inflated house prices and easy consumer credit, all the talk is of 'rebalancing' the British economy. We need to get back to making and doing things that others wish to buy. The Liberal Democrats should be arguing for a much wider engagement in this process, so SLF should encourage the party to revive the interest the Liberal Party once had in co-operatives, mutuals and workplace democracy.

## AN IDEA OF THE STATE

Task no.5 is to apply the concept of 'agency' to the state. Debate is currently dominated by the coalition government's plans to cut or privatise public services. This tempts critics to develop a knee-jerk defence of the centralised state.

Social liberals should know better. After all, hasn't every Focus Team spent years campaigning against bad public services? No one could argue that the NHS is faultless after the recent Stafford Hospital scandal (which was not caused by cuts).

When public services fail, it is usually because they deny agency to the people and communities they are meant to serve. They are often grossly inefficient, so SLF should adopt the Liberal case for thrift proposed by David Boyle in *Liberator* 339. Public services can be cheaper and more effective if we get rid of centralisation and bigness.

SLF should reject Fabian paternalism and develop a localist critique of public services. There is no virtue in New Labour's technocracy, control freakery and sclerotic service systems, so SLF should beware of jumping aboard Labour's anti-cuts bandwagon.

Labour's agenda also presents another danger. Labour shares with the Conservatives an assumption that the public sector and the public realm are all about service provision. This economism confines the left to arguing for the state merely as a rival supplier of public services. It does not allow for the argument that collectivised means of provision have broader social functions, by enabling democratic control or demonstrating social solidarity.

## AN IDEA OF COMMUNITY

Task no.6 is to develop a distinct idea of 'community'. The question of community has become politically salient because of increasing anxiety about social breakdown. The most obvious sign is the emergence of the 'Big Society', conceived by 'Red Tory' Phillip Blond. The Labour Party has now produced an equivalent communitarian movement, 'Blue Labour' led by Maurice Glasman.

Most Liberal Democrats share concerns about social breakdown but they should be wary of the Red Tories and Blue Labour, who base their analysis on hostility to liberalism. Both groups are socially conservative, seeing conformity and a loss of individual autonomy as the price we must pay for rebuilding social cohesion.

SLF should help the party develop an alternative approach to social cohesion that does not sacrifice people's essential individuality. An idea of community that reconciles people's need for belonging and community with their need for agency and autonomy would be distinctly Liberal. If the party doesn't do this, no one else will, and we risk losing many of the hard-won personal freedoms gained since the 1960s.

## KNOW YOUR ENEMY

Task no.7 is to understand what you are up against. SLF would not have been founded were it not for right-wing intrigue in the party. But is the problem 'right wing' or 'intrigue'?

The leading plotters call themselves 'right wing' but most have no sincere ideology. In the 1980s, they were social democratic; in the 1990s, Blairite; in the 2000s, neoliberal. This looks hypocritical but is actually consistent; a consistent belief in positioning, cynically

aligning with whichever orthodoxy seems to offer a short cut to power. Their guiding faith is less about politics, more about establishing a social pecking order; they imagine they are an elite with an entitlement to power and status.

But the theory that an elite knows best has been tested to destruction twice by the Liberal Democrats. First, immediately after the merger, when Liberal right wingers joined with a paranoid SDP leadership to dismantle party democracy, only to see membership, income and votes plummet. Second, when the right toppled Chris Rennard and took over the party's 2010 election campaign, only to make a complete hash of it.

Things go wrong because right wingers haven't the balls to test their ideas in open debate. To pursue their goals, they bypass the party's democratic machinery. They don't bother fielding slates in internal elections or proposing motions to conference. The focus of their scheming is now the CentreForum's 'Coalition 2.0', a completely undemocratic exercise that will have more influence on the party than anything the conference says.

SLF can win all the internal elections and conference debates it likes. But if that's all it does, they will be pyrrhic victories. To win the battle for the soul of the party, SLF must also mount a broader campaign. Given that the right operates mostly in secret, the strategy should be to flush them out. Force them to justify their actions in public. They'll love it.

## DROP THE 'P' WORD

Finally, task no.8 is to stop using the word 'progressive'. What does it mean? The only discernable meaning is 'not conservative' or 'not reactionary', but those are negative definitions.

'Progressive' is a loaded word, implying a natural affinity with the Labour Party. It is based on the false premise that politics consists of only two sides; Liberals and Labour on one side, the Tories on the other. But why should Liberal Democrats give the benefit of the doubt to Labour, the party of the Iraq War and ID cards? True, the two parties are closer on Keynesian economics, but would any Lib Dem prefer Jack Straw to Ken Clarke at the Ministry of Justice? Even after Clarke's recent gaffe about rape.

SLF may enjoy cordial relations with certain Labour metropolitan *bien pensant* types. This should not blind it to the thick strand of social conservatism running through the Labour Party – a muscular Labourism typified by John Reid and David Blunkett, with a visceral contempt for liberal values.

The 'p' word is a lazy word, so give it up. It will force you to say what you really mean, and that's a good thing. Because right now, we need real politics, not empty slogans. We face a once-in-a-generation opportunity, when a clapped-out political orthodoxy (neoliberalism) will shortly be replaced by something else. To seize this chance, the Liberal Democrats need a compelling vision. They will need one anyway if, after the debacle of this May's elections, they are to survive the next general election.

SLF's duty is to refresh the party by defining that vision. But if all SLF can do is parrot Labour's hackneyed anti-cuts mantras, count me out.

---

Simon Titley is a member of the *Liberator* Collective