

MODERATELY IMMODERATE

It's both wrong and pointless to be moderate about deprivation when the Lib Dems have the policies needed if only they realised, says Richard Kemp

Since Vince Cable launched his ideas about a new supporters' group; what it might do and the suggestion that we should make a wider appeal to the 'moderates of the UK' I have thought about what he said and what that might mean in practice. I have also travelled to London, Cambridge, Taunton and parts of the Liverpool City Region to think about what that might mean.

I have looked with interest both at what Vince has had to say about our party and a way forward but also at the reaction to it. I welcome the discussion and agree with much of the analysis in the document that the party produced for conference.

I love the idea of a supporters' group which brings together the many people who help us but, for whatever reason, do not want to be part of a party. An informal grouping can ensure that we get proper feedback when we make policies and campaign, and partly cement their relationship with us. Of course, I would prefer them to become members but if they cannot let us go for a different model for them.

ALARMING AND NAIVE

Two things I do disagree with. Firstly, the idea that people can quickly become candidates and then elected is alarming and naive. In a recent blog I talked about the hard work of being a councillor, MP or even committed activist. People need not only to know that before they stand but also 'feel' what is required. Already more than 30% of people who become councillors only serve one term, if that. They don't realise the stress and strains.

Speed is not the answer to this. If we want more people to stand we must become better at providing support for people who will have difficulty in fulfilling an elected role; people from minority groups, parents with children, the disabled and others.

The sad fact is that our party, like all others, throws people in at the deep end and doesn't help people to swim.

I won't spend much time on the idea of our leader not being a parliamentarian. It's just a bonkers notion. Similarly, the idea that anyone can vote for who should be our candidates is tosh. There are ways in which we can and should involve more people in both policy making and candidate choosing but having members not having the final vote is not one of them.

My major disagreement, however, is with the concept of being a moderate. My ambition has always to act moderately but to think and campaign radically.

What do I mean by that? Well behaving moderately is behaving liberally. I am appalled by the way that many people these days too easily slag off their opponents even the ones in their own party. I am appalled by the echo chambers of Twitter and other

parts of the social media.

Really nasty stuff gets said and then disseminated. Many Twitter accounts exist in a fact free zone with whole histories being created from a tissue of lies and then promulgated.

Many people I know have left social media behind. Some watch it but don't participate. Cyber bullying has become a way of life that some of us endure from our political opponents on a regular basis. Some politicians shy away from face-to-face meetings; public meetings and the numbers of hustings at election time has massively shrunk. Without such primary contact arguments become unhinged, partisan, devoid of humour and fact.

I'm no shrinking violet in the council chamber or anywhere but humour is a better tool than invective and I always try to be courteous, factual and polite as I propose positions. The football metaphor, "Play the ball not the man", is the methodology that I try to use.

But where I cannot be moderate is in the policies and programmes that I and our party espouse. I haven't spent 51 years in the party, 36 of them as a councillor in a deprived city and 23 years as a councillor in a deprived ward, because I believe that moderate ways forward will solve the problems that I see daily.

I am a radical liberal. I believe that all the evidence we have indicates that the only way to mend a broken society, and our society is broken, is to rebuild it sector by sector, area by area from the bottom up.

Our society, but certainly the great cities of the north, are suffering because whole cities, communities and individuals have become powerless. The great and the good make decisions in Westminster and Whitehall; in corporate board rooms around the world or in well meaning but remote non-profit organisations which are often poorly informed and usually not focussed on real needs and practical solutions. Too many people are now left behind and while letting people have more money is an important step, letting them have more control of their lives is equally important (yes, I know that the two do often go together).

Let me just give four examples from my past and present.

Almost 40 years ago I established the largest housing cooperative programme in western Europe when I was chair of Liverpool's housing committee. Today there are more than 40 housing co-ops in the city with better designed, better run and more sustainable communities than anything that was provided by council housing or social landlords. People maximise their involvement in the key decisions about their home and community.

Today I serve on the board of one of the subsidiaries of Churches, Charities and Local Authorities, which provides a first-class investment service for

a better return on capital than entirely private organisations.

It pays its staff well for their skills but not opulently as they look after more than £8.5bn of assets. Greed does not have to be the key motivator for the people behind financial decisions.

At the other end of the scale I keep my savings, such as they are, in both a building society and Lodge Lane Credit Union. In both cases they provide as a good a return or better for my savings than banks and again do so without paying vast salaries. Any 'profit' is returned to the communities that the staff work in, live in and support.

I buy a lot of food at the farmers market in my ward. Erica and I buy our food and other supplies wherever possible in local shops and markets where any profit made recycles around the local community and where shop and stall keepers both know their customers and care for them as part of the community.

You might say that there are small things but if we all did them they would become big things. They indicate that other ways are possible than creating 'bigness' and remoteness. The fact that I subscribe to neither the loony left or the loony right does not make me a moderate. I am a radical liberal and proud of it.

So, what can we do about it?

Well firstly we have to look at our policies and realise how good they are were we prepared to talk about them enough; disseminate them enough and live them enough.

I am doing a series of articles on my blog about the radical policies which we have agreed at recent party conferences. The ones on housing, health and education that we have passed this year are especially good. Look at my conclusions (at Richardkemp.wordpress.com) and you might think I have radicalised them a bit. That is true, but basically I have added little to the policy asks but have tried to explain them in a way that means something to people who are not policy nerds.

Secondly, we need to pull the themes out of our policies and show the golden threads of liberalism which flow through them. Bottom up policies; returning decision making to people; fighting bureaucracy; fighting greed; fighting environmental devastation; fighting nationalistic isolationism. All these things can be seen in so many parts of our policy but when we join the dots up we do in such a bland and boring way that I doubt even a majority of our conference delegates read the stuff that comes out of the party sausage machine. We need to write and speak about things in a way that appeals not to the leader writer of the Guardian but to men and women in the pub.

FAR ANGRIER

Thirdly, we need to be far angrier and more emotive about what is happening to our communities; country and world.

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I just cannot be moderate about the number of children in this country who live in poverty. These kids are not statistics they are disasters. I cannot be moderate about the disparity between rich and poor in this country. I cannot be moderate about the fact that I am desperately worried about the way climate change will wreck the lives of my grandchildren and everyone else's grandchildren. I cannot be moderate about the fact that after six decades of housing improvement standards are once again slipping.

Fourthly we must move ourselves away from a concept that we are a part of the soggy centre of British politics. We are not somewhere between Labour Left and Tory Right. This party is on an entirely different plane. We are the only party that does not seek power for ourselves but would act as the facilitators of a transfer of power back to the people.

Labour and Tory alike hate this. They use different words but basically, they are both satisfied with the fact that we live in the most centralised state in western Europe. That's because they want the power for themselves.

Lastly, we need to convert these four ideas, which are complementary, into a great liberal crusade. People do not join us because they worry whether we are moderate or centrist enough. They don't join us because they don't have any clear idea of our vision for society; of our anger and of our passion. In political campaign terms we say we are “here all year not just at election time”. That is what we need to do more of. We are a crusade or we are a sideline; we are a force for major change or we are a non-entity.

The people of the UK are tired of conventional politics. Only the Lib Dems can bring our campaigning zeal to bear to bring to us parents who are tired of their children being in education factories; communities that are wrecked by decisions made by a remote government that doesn't care; 30 year-olds who have to wait for mum and dad to die before getting money for a house; commuters paying a fortune to travel like sardines into our cities, that there is a better way.

If our party is prepared to take on society's vested interest then we will find that we do not speak for 8, 9 or 10% of the electorate but for 50% and more. We must break the power of Westminster and Whitehall we must set the people of the UK free.

Richard Kemp is leader of the Liberal Democrats on Liverpool City Council