

USING THE SHIFT KEY

It's time to give Liberalism back its capital L and use its principles to meet contemporary problems, says Tony Greaves

I remember a party conference soon after the merger of the Liberal Party and the SDP in 1988, when we were called the Social and Liberal Democrats. John Smithson was heckled for starting his speech with the customary Liberal Party address “fellow Liberals”.

I tried it at Bournemouth this year and got no reaction, perhaps because most of the people present had never heard the phrase. As party leader Paddy Ashdown wanted to rename the party ‘The Democrats’. A ballot of members to choose between ‘The Democrats’ and ‘Liberal Democrats’ chose Liberal Democrats by around two to one. One argument was that there was a historic Liberal vote and by ditching ‘Liberal’ from our name we ran the risk of losing it. Many of us just thought we were Liberals.

But in the early days it was not popular to say that. Policy-making in the new party was like treading on eggshells. A vocal body of opinion thought we had to create a new synergy, different from and better than either L/liberalism or S/social D/democracy. This was nonsense; it was clear to anyone who could see further than next week that the destiny of the Liberal Democrats was as the Liberal party of British politics, a role we had inherited from the Liberal Party itself.

Paddy once came to Pendle for a campaigning visit and we held a public meeting where, possibly to the surprise of some, he gave a long thoughtful speech about Liberalism. But Charles Kennedy was really the first leader to talk about Liberalism and Liberal objectives on a regular basis. He was later echoed by Nick Clegg (though his Liberalism was of a somewhat different shade to that of Charles). Tim Farron never had any doubts that he is a Liberal.

EMBARRASSING WORD

I am using the word Liberal with a capital L in all this. But the small l usage has taken over much discussion within the party. So where does it leave us, as the Liberal (or liberal?) party and as members of the party? What are we and does it matter? First let's get rid of the embarrassing word ‘neoliberal’.

It is certainly not a ‘neo’ version of what we stand for. If you don't agree, read the preamble to the Liberal Democrat constitution (as a whole). Neoliberalism is a narrowly economic view of politics and society and our place on this planet. It is the political expression of neoclassical economics that has overwhelmed much of academic teaching of economics in recent decades. It underpinned Thatcherism and Blairism. It is now clear that, as a comprehensive description of how the world works, it is wrong. Politically so-called neoliberals “belong well to our right. (And if Richard Cobden and John Stuart Mill were alive today I am quite sure they would be with us and not with the neoliberals!)

So why is there a problem? Lots of people in the

party just call themselves liberals; lots of others use the words liberal and Liberal interchangeably. But if half the world now call themselves liberals and mean lots of different things by that, our party must make it much clearer what we stand for and how that makes us distinctive.

We will not do that if we don't say that our principles, our policies, our aims and objectives and indeed we ourselves are specifically Liberal, relating to the Liberal Democrats and not just a smallish subset of all the ‘liberals’ strung across the planet. I checked *Liberator* 386. Ignoring specific references to the party or its members (and where it was ambiguous starting a sentence) the words L/liberal and L/liberalism occurred 33 times. 20 with an L and 13 with an l. Often mixed up for no apparent reasons (in one piece Roger Hayes helpfully referred to “capital L Liberals” then relapsed to lower case!)

One more qualification – ‘liberal’ does not have an identical meaning in all places or all languages. American liberalism used to be rather more corporate than the British version and more identity-based, though there seems to have been a convergence of meanings in recent years and British and American liberals have always felt themselves to be political buddies. But the French word ‘libéral’ is a more neoliberal term than ours and its usage is for politicians who are on the right at least in economic terms. The use and self-use of the word liberal has seen quite a dramatic surge in recent years. All kinds of people have professed themselves and others to be liberals. It has got to the stage when saying someone is a liberal is almost as useless as calling someone a socialist – all things to all users, and as meaningless.

But let's be fair - liberals are generally against a lot of dreadful things that are going on in the world.

They are against the corporate and security statism and ‘controlled democracy’ of Putin's Russia. They are against military adventurism such as that in Crimea and eastern Ukraine and the invasion of Iraq. They are against dictators such as Assad and sundry African tin-pots, or religion-based regimes such as the Saudis and Iran. They are against ISIL and other insurgent jihadist groups. They are against Trump and Breitbart and the rest of the alt-right. They are against Brexit. They are against terrorism, and against illiberal responses to terrorism. They are against treating refugees like human flotsam (and, worse, turning them into jetsam). They are against the rise of right wing populists and fascists from the BNP to Farage to Wilders to Le Pen to Alternative Deutschland to the Austrian Freedom Party. They are against rigging elections.

But they don't know how to respond to Xi Jinping's China as it opens up its economy but clamps down on dissent. When it comes to separatist/ nationalist movements they are as confused as ever. They are

against poverty and inequality but not sure just how much.

The globalisation of more open markets and the development of what people call free trade was widely thought to be a liberal construct, inevitable, desirable, with liberals ‘believing they are on what they like to think

is the right side of history” in the words of the New Statesman’s John Gray, an interesting and perceptive commentator well to the right of Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell but certainly not a liberal.

A year ago he wrote: “Today’s liberals differ widely about how the wealth and opportunities of a market economy should be shared. What none of them question is the type of market globalisation that has developed over the past three decades.” But that is clearly wrong about British Liberals. Long before the events of 2008 and its aftermath threw so many liberals into an orgy of self-searching and creative thought, the Liberal Party itself had called for ‘fair trade’ rather than multi-national dominated ‘free trade’.

And then there is the whole question of identity politics where the issues (of tackling discrimination and promoting personal freedoms) are fundamentally liberal but the politics are more complex.

The US academic Mark Lilla created more than a frisson of panic among liberals when he suggested identity liberalism had created a “kind of moral panic about racial, gender and sexual identity” which granted specific rights and privileges but not duties to the wider society. It was based on personal and tribal claims; it fragmented and distorted liberalism’s message and “prevented it from becoming a unifying force”. Add to that the effect of the rise of petty patriotisms around the world – more tribalism – and it looks like liberalism is falling apart rather than hegemonic. If the appeal of the likes of Ukip and the Front National is essentially tribal in nature, where does it leave the liberal politics of identity?

For a time around a year ago after Trump, Brexit and the rest, everyone was debating the fate of what the Guardian’s tame Tory Matthew d’Ancona called “all you despondent liberals”. His answer – “get off your wusses [whatever that means]...soft liberalism doesn’t cut it any more. Time to try the hard variety”. All under the headline: “Liberals stand your ground and toughen up”.

And to be fair he set out a pretty good check-list of 10 very liberal issues. But Zoe Williams, sharing his space but not his politics, pointed out that when the right attacked ‘liberalism’ they were really attacking morality and values which underlie all decent and civilised political discourse and action. To which we may cry “hear, hear”. But that does not help us to develop and promote our own Liberal definition.

POLITICAL NASTIES

Not every decent person is a Liberal, and not every one is a liberal. After the unexpected Corbyn surge in the general election much public debate has reverted to the kind of clash of celebrity-leaders that the media

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find easy. With Theresa May struggling to survive on three fronts, assailed by the EU, Labour and her own party, the underlying issues have rather sunk out of sight. But they will come back. In spite of what some think Corbyn and McDonnell are not political nasties. But they are not liberals and do not consider themselves to be so.

The global political struggle is still a complex and convoluted battle between the forces of authoritarian populism (in all its forms) and liberalism (in all its forms). This is in the context of enormous modern issues such as climate change, global migration, the decline of local democracy and the public sector alongside the rise of managerial/ technocratic solutions linked to the insidious takeover of services by private corporations, the rise of strident nationalism accompanying a breakdown of international diplomacy and security in all its forms, a global economy ever more controlled by huge unaccountable corporations (linked to the collection of ever more data in the hands of the GAFA-led oligopoly not to mention sinister operators hellbent on undermining western democracy), the future of work and indeed the meaning of humanity in the face of robotisation – automation on a previously unknown scale and depth, all linked to a global society in which the forces of neoliberal economics are running riot and a planetary ecosystem which gets closer to disastrous collapse with every day that passes.

If all this is a fair account of what is going on, Corbyn’s 40-years-old socialism is not going to provide many lasting answers. And an upsurge based on one old man’s rather quaint charisma is not going to last long in a country that is still essentially open and democratic.

Our task as Liberal Democrats is to develop Liberal answers to these and so many other problems, starting from the fundamental principles that underpin our party, then campaign for them.

I am reminded of Roger McGough’s little poem. “Once I lived in capitals/My life intensely phallic/But now I’m sadly lower case/With the occasional italic.”

It’s time for all of us to start using that shift key a bit more.

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