liberator

So, who campaigned *for* Europe?

In this issue

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COMMENTARY

THE CAUSE THAT DARE NOT SPEAK ITS NAME

'Say No' said the UKIP leaflets, a misguided but clear and simple message. Where was the one that said 'yes' to Europe? Not in Liberal Democrat leaflets, at least not loud and clear. Yet again, and despite a good slogan in 'Making Europe Work for You', the Liberal Democrats have failed to go determinedly after a pro-European vote that is far larger than the party's own support, and which has nowhere else to go.

All manner of explanations can be advanced. Some are valid, like the coincidence of the European and local elections, which meant there was a concentration on the latter in target areas and a reluctance to divert resources elsewhere.

Some are not valid, like the feeling that, for the third European election running, the Liberal Democrats have sought to attract votes despite - and not because of - their support for the European Union.

It is true that the party was very close to winning a second seat in both London and the south west, that its haul of MEPs increased and that it was pushed into fourth place by only 1.2 per cent of the vote.

But a party with the standing and aspirations of the Liberal Democrats should not be pushed into fourth place, or anywhere near it, and particularly not by a party that is only one step up the scale in respectability from the BNP.

Look behind UKIP's simple slogan at its references to ending 'overcrowding', to Britain being 'full' and, bizarrely, to "doing whatever is necessary to return crime levels to those of the 1950s" (hanging? birching? transportation to the colonies its members no doubt wish Britain still had?).

This is not a party that simply wishes to come out of the EU; something poisonous has been released into mainstream politics, and it is something that will compete with the Liberal Democrats for the floating protest vote.

The possibilities of taking a robust line and fighting a proper campaign on Europe were graphically illustrated by the north west. In that region, the Liberal Democrats picked up a second seat and easily outpolled UKIP. The north west benefited from a long-planned strategy to take the second seat and, in Chris Davies, from an MEP prepared to put his time and money into building up his regional party, an example from which certain other MEPs could learn.

It was a different, and far better, story in the local elections. The public's lack of trust in prime minister Tony Blair, since the Iraq war, delivered the Liberal Democrats some startlingly good results, in particular in northern England, although there were losses in the south.

Two new factors came into play. For the first time, the party was able to make compensating gains in Labour strongholds at a time when it was losing to the Tories in their historic areas (for comparison, look at the Liberals' local election slaughterings of the late 1970s). The other is the support gained in the Muslim community.

Both are most desirable, but is the party putting down roots in these areas of new support or simply collecting up temporary votes, as has happened in the past? Iraq will at some point fade from prominence, and cannot be relied upon to deliver this particular harvest twice, so is any thought going into how this new base can be consolidated?

In the south, there will be some MPs looking nervously over their shoulders, as the Tory vote rose across the regions where the bulk of Liberal Democrat parliamentary seats lie.

A panicky programme of trying to appeal to Tories is the last thing needed; it will damage support among newly acquired Labour-inclined voters, while giving credibility to the real Tory programme.

It would also look as if the party had slipped back into its bad old ways of the 1980s, of trying to be everything to everyone and ending up being nothing to anyone.

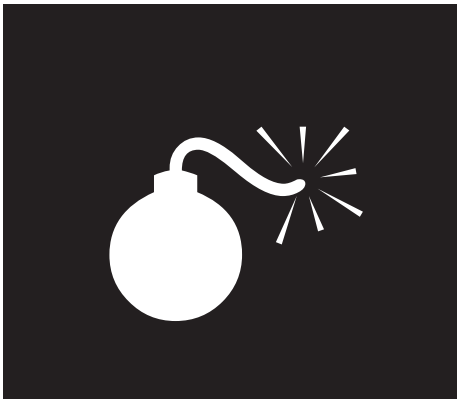
The contrasting regional results gave a good propaganda point by allowing the Liberal Democrats to claim wide appeal to different parts of the country.

But they contain a potential problem for a general election, if the party continues to try to define itself in terms of others and approaches the task by saying "right, we'll have six policies to appeal to Tory voters and half a dozen to appeal to Labour ones".

This is bound up with the initial point about the European campaign. Trust in politicians is low, and nuanced or abruptly changing positions are quite likely to be assumed by voters to be duplicitous.

Better for the party to be clear how it will set out its stall, and accept that some people, such as pronounced europhobes, will dislike it and go elsewhere.

Finally, a mischievous thought. In local elections by first past the post, the Liberal Democrats polled 30 per cent. In the European and London elections, conducted by forms of proportional representation, the party got about half that. Is it still so keen on electoral reform?



RADICAL BULLETIN

MONEY FOR OLD ROPE

The sudden lurch to the right in Liberal Democrat economic policy, heralded by last year's policy paper Setting Business Free (Liberator 290) and Treasury spokesman Vincent Cable's eurosceptic press release this April, may have led many party members to wonder just who is making policy these days.

Anyone around at the time of the merger in 1988 will recall how the new party was to have a 'deliberative' policy-making system, in place of the old Liberal Party's much-derided (by the forces of darkness) system of conference motions. More recently, there has been criticism of Liberal Democrat policy-making being dominated by 'producer interests'.

It turns out that the critics of 'producer interests' were concerned only about producers from the public sector. Private sector producer interests are more than welcome to have undue influence on party policy.

The Liberal Democrats are running two fundraising operations that openly tout influence in return for donations. The Liberty Network promises on its website that "the foremost advantage of membership is the ability to voice your concerns and offer your solutions to issues, directly. Members will also have full access to a password-protected website and phone line… Through a dialogue between members, and between members and MPs, every last person in the Liberty Network will have a real voice in British politics."

Meanwhile, the Liberal Democrat Business Forum makes a similar promise on its website. Donors are offered, "an environment where business, trade bodies and trades unions can contribute their views to the party's policy-makers as they seek to formulate and develop policy affecting business."

However, a more thorough search reveals little evidence of trades union participation (for example, the Business Forum's 'links' webpage includes links to the Social Market Foundation and the National Federation of Retail Newsagents, but not to the TUC).

But the Business Forum offers its members more. Its website adds, "The Business Forum also has a formal link into policy development in the area of trade and industry through the Business Policy Group. It is led by Chris Shirley and Dr Vince Cable MP, and members are drawn from the Business Forum Advisory Board and beyond."

The Business Forum was set up at the behest of a fundraising company hired by the party. Liberty Network is an umbrella brand for the party's official fundraising ventures, such as the post-election party on 11 June and the annual ball. It is a limited company set up last year, which channels all the money raised to the campaign fund, rather than to party funds in general.

Liberator is not suggesting that anything remotely dishonest is going on. What is open to question about all this fund-raising (not to mention a so-called 'formal link' into policy development) is accountability. The Treasurer's Unit is not line-managed by the party's chief executive and has been relocated from Cowley Street to the leader's office. Members of the Federal Executive who have attempted to probe this state of affairs have reported difficulty in securing full answers.

The other concern is that, given the likely political sympathises of rich donors, there will be a tendency to support the 'economic liberal' position of Cable and his deputy David Laws, given that 'economic liberalism' as a doctrine is prevalent only among those rich enough insulate themselves from its consequences.

Laws is currently editing a book of essays in support of this economic position, due for publication later this year, for which Cable has written a chapter. The House of Commons Register of Members' Interests reports that both Laws and Northavon MP Steve Webb each registered a "Financial donation to my parliamentary office from Mr Paul Marshall to facilitate research for my contribution to a book on party policy. (Registered 11 November 2003)." Marshall is coincidentally a member of the Business Forum's Business Policy Group.

Webb's role in unclear. Given that he has been engaged in a furious row with Laws over the money that would be available for the party's pensions policy, his stance may be somewhat different.

The assumption behind these fund-raising initiatives is probably the traditional one; to persuade wealthy businessmen to cough up in return for some notion that they are influencing party policy – why else would they bother? But until we get state funding for political parties and a consequent ban on 'strings-attached' donations, there will always remain issues about how such money is raised and spent.

And if the 'deliberative' policy-making machinery, on which the SDP insisted at the merger, is now being turned into policy-making sold to the highest bidder, party members have every right to be concerned.

TINKER TAYLOR

On a related matter, professor Robert Taylor's career in the Liberal Democrats was brief but spectacular, and throws some light on the party's increasingly unsatisfactory policy-making process.

Taylor is an academic and journalist with years of experience in trade union and employment issues.

He joined the Liberal Democrats from Labour in autumn 2002, and was later asked to chair the policy working group on trade unions.

Members were initially pleased to have someone of such standing in the role. But after only one meeting before conference and a consultative session last autumn, he resigned shortly after the first post-conference meeting, complaining about the laissez faire/economic liberal line being taken by the party.

One member of the working group told Liberator that, while Philip Goldenberg, one of godfathers of Setting Business Free, had said that this anti-union document should be the starting point for the paper, other members did not agree, except in the limited sense that all existing party policy forms a starting point for further discussion.

No straw polls had been taken or any line emerged to suggest that Setting Business Free, or anything else, represented the settled view of the working group.

In this version of events, it was unclear what Taylor objected to prior to his resignation, and his successor Alan Sherwell, president of the Association of Liberal Democrat Trade Unionists, is now picking up the pieces of the exercise.

Taylor's style of chairing meetings has come under fire from some of the working group members, who complain that he dominated proceedings excessively at the first two meetings.

However, Taylor told Liberator: "I feel I was ambushed after producing my consultative document. The ultra economic liberals wanted me to put a preface into the final policy that was in essence a call for free markets.

"It was made plain to me that the party's employment and industrial relations policy must fit in to the 'set[ting] business free agenda'."

Taylor says he is all for markets, and thinks employee rights are not incompatible.

But he added: "My fear is the party has moved away from a social market agenda and is in the same place as the Tories and New Labour. I think the time is ripe for a new approach based on improving the quality of working life for everybody.

"The party is being hijacked by economic liberals who would justify scrapping the factory acts and removing all worker protections in the name of competition and profitability. This is a serious problem."

This is exactly what Liberator warned about last autumn when Setting Business Free was adopted – that its anti-union bias would be used as a piece of agenda-setting to tie down the later trade union policy paper (Liberator 290).

As it happened, it was Cable's economic liberals who hijacked the Setting Business Free working group, but the central failing of the policy-making process is that any group with an axe to grind could have done likewise.

With little enthusiasm among party members to sit on policy groups, and the requirement of 'expertise' for those who do, they are open to capture by minority interests.

Setting Business Free had kicked around for three years without anyone doing much and there was some relief in the Federal Policy Committee when Cable at least volunteered to do something with it.

The deliberative policy-making system foisted on the party at merger has degenerated into one where groups of experts – real or self-described – can, in effect, appoint themselves to write impenetrable policy papers that no-one reads and which are then passed by conference on the basis of motions that misleadingly and partially (in both senses) summarise their content.

As we have argued before, the local government scrutiny model offers a route out – under which politicians would take evidence from experts and anyone else and then arrive at conclusions. Will anyone open this up?

SIMON SAYS, WHAT EXACTLY?

This Liberator went to press just after the local elections, and the dust had barely settled, but it is safe bet that a great deal of dust will be blowing around London as post-mortems get going on the shambles of Simon Hughes' mayoral campaign.

It must be said in mitigation that the whole thing was conceived on the premise that Ken Livingstone would again run as an independent, with Labour fielding a separate candidate. In that four-way split, Hughes's chances would have been a great deal better than they were against Livingstone as a Labour candidate.

However, Hughes is the second best-known Liberal Democrat in the country, is well-liked in London and genuinely popular inside and outside the Liberal Democrats. How then did he end up with only half the national 30 per cent vote share?

The campaign was a re-run of his ill-fated bid for the party leadership in 1999. It started too late, appeared to be run by friends and made little impact.

Senior figures across local parties in London complained about the campaign's low profile and lack of basics, such as getting material out on time, but found their concerns airily dismissed.

With Tory candidate Steve Norris's involvement with the controversial rail contractor Jarvis hung round his neck, Livingstone having to defend his record and Iraq running in the party's favour, a 3.4 per cent increase on the voting share from last time does not look like a great advance.

It is widely rumoured that, at Tim Clement-Jones's insistence, an advertising agency was employed at a cost of £60,000 to advise on the campaign. What the fruits of this were is anyone's guess.

WATER EVERYWHERE

'Wet' was the term applied to the Tory party's Heathites by their opponents, but a more suitable recipient of this title might be the National Movement Simeon II of Bulgaria, where the Liberal International congress will be held next year.

Simeon II is the pretender to the Bulgarian throne, but he has renounced this, set up his own political party, and been elected prime minister.

Perhaps this policy summary, handed out to bemused delegates at a recent ELDR rally, casts some light on the party's position: "To run water from a copper on one's path is an old Bulgarian tradition, dating back to the indigenous Thracian tribes. The roots of the rite can be found in some of the pagan rites of the Thracians, Slavs and Old Bulgarians.

"Water is a pivotal point in ancient rites, symbolizing purity, life and, in this specific case, 'a clear path ahead of you'. By spilling water before one's feet you purify the land one will step on, the path one will follow, you make one's step clean, steady and right. And with geranium, the Bulgarian flower of health, added, one is sure to reach the aspired goal."

KULTURKAMPF

The controversy over the EU constitution and rise of UKIP suggest something much deeper than euroscepticism, says Simon Titley

What is the argument over the EU constitution really about? Hardly anyone has read the complete draft. Most British people have no idea what it says or what difference it might actually make. Yet this document is generating widespread and visceral hostility.

To explain this apparent discrepancy, a consensus is emerging, which says the reason for the controversy is that the constitutional debate is a proxy for the real issue, Britain's membership of the EU.

Up to a point. The issue of EU membership is in turn a proxy for something even more fundamental. A new and serious divide is opening up in Britain, which is likely to define politics for decades to come. This divide will take the path of least resistance, which is why it currently manifests itself through various channels; Europe, asylum seekers or petrol tax, depending on whatever's topical this week.

If Liberals fail to recognise the emergence of this new divide, they risk the same fate as liberals in the USA, who found themselves outmanoeuvred by conservatives to the extent that the very word 'liberal' was redefined as a pejorative term.

Conrad Russell, in his article 'The Ring of Slack Water' (Liberator 275), remarked that apathy and hostility to politicians had historically always been a feature of periods in which there was no clear ideological conflict. He predicted that this moment of 'slack water' would not last and that new issues would arise.

For most of the twentieth century, British politics was about class. But in the last thirty years, class-consonant voting has declined sharply. While class has not disappeared, it is no longer a clear indicator of political allegiance or perceived economic interests.

If class has ceased to be the defining and dividing issue in British politics, and if the subsequent period of ideological slack water is coming to an end, where is the new divide? Perceptions of economic self-interest are likely to be at the heart of the matter because politics is 'real' for most people around the issue of resources.

Since the end of empire, there has been a continuing and unsettled dispute about who we English are. This unresolved issue of identity did not become critical until globalisation came along. Now, a cocktail of insecure identity and perceived threats to economic self-interest is at the heart of a new conservatism.

Gilbert and Sullivan's quote, "Nature always does contrive / that every boy or girl born alive / is either a little liberal or a little conservative," remains a handy categorisation for the new divide, but we must exercise some caution.

In defining the new ideological divide, it is tempting to assume that most people have a coherent ideology. In reality, they tend to have a collection of often-contradictory emotional impulses. Conservative and liberal forces act on people, not so much as fully worked-out ideological positions, more as tides that drag people this way and that. But different people tend to be susceptible to one force more than another.

New interpretations of conservative and liberal positions are crystallising and a 'Kulturkampf' (cultural war) between them is emerging. This term originally referred to the struggle led by continental Liberals against the Catholic church in nineteenth century Germany, but has also been applied to the divisions between liberals and conservatives today in the USA.

In the USA, the touchstone issues are to do either with ethical issues such as abortion and gay rights (because of the highly religious nature of American society), or the size of government (because of a cultural tradition of individual self-reliance). The fault lines in Britain are in different places. The powerful emotional triggers for British conservatives (in the broader sense) seem to be anything to do with foreigners (Europe, asylum seekers) or cars (petrol tax, speed cameras). In contrast, liberals (in the broader sense) have yet to define or defend their interests with the same passion. Gut conservatism is already running riot but gut liberalism has yet to find its voice.

Underlying these issues is something far more serious. There are increasing signs that gut conservatives are questioning the whole liberal democratic (in the broadest sense) contract. This is expressed in the pages of the many of the tabloids – a rejection of the idea of representative democracy, and an assumption that all people in public life are corrupt; a rejection of due process, and support for lynch law; a rejection of deliberation and analysis, and a faith in gut reaction and finger-stabbing certainties.

The gut conservative also has a visceral fear of the 'other'. This insecurity springs partly from an ill-defined sense of English identity and uncertainty over the future of the United Kingdom. But also, most English people have lost the support structures that settled communities, extended families, trades unions and the public sphere once supplied. It is ironic that conservatives' sense of insecurity springs directly from the demolition job carried out by conservatives in the 1980s.

Much of the white English animosity towards minorities stems from jealousy and a suspicion of the sense of community and support networks that these minorities enjoy. English people attempt to fill their spiritual void through materialism, yet the 'other' appears to be having a better time, and this sticks in the gullet.

Rock musician Morrissey has captured the dilemma facing English people feeling their way towards a comfortable identity. In his new song 'Irish Blood, English

Heart', he says "I've been dreaming of a time when to be English is not to be baneful, to be standing by the flag not feeling shameful, racist or martial." Yet Morrissey may be identifying battle lines rather than solutions.

If we liberals are to be engaged in a Kulturkampf with conservatives, just whom are we facing? A recent Guardian feature (June 7), analysing the growth of the BNP in Pendle, quoted local Liberal Democrat Tim Haigh: "People in Earby resent everything that has happened in the past 50 years. It's… a town with a grudge, that feels it's always last in line, and has a chip on its shoulder because it never grew as big as Skipton or Barnoldswick."

Conservatism was once the natural home of the wealthy and powerful. Now, its core appeal is to losers, rather like Hitler's appeal to the 'little man'. A Guardian/ICM poll (published 15 June) found that UKIP voters were "overwhelmingly less affluent, older men."

And one can learn a lot about gut conservatives by the descriptions they use about us: 'bleeding heart', 'wishy-washy', 'do-gooder', 'namby pamby', 'airy-fairy', 'arty-farty'. These obligatory prefixes to the world 'liberal' reveal a combination of anti-intellectualism and a belief in toughness for the sake of toughness.

A good indicator of gut conservative reactions is the BBC, a focal point for hostility not because of any party political bias, but because it represents a cosmopolitan and intellectual worldview that conservatives loathe – a world of black news presenters and weather maps that show parts of the continent.

The success of UKIP in the European elections is undoubtedly causing many Liberal Democrats to assume that their strategy must now be to mollify this grassroots conservatism. Yet UKIP is not our problem. According to the Guardian/ICM poll (15 June), only 11% of UKIP's support came from former Liberal Democrat voters. If anything, UKIP is likely to help the Lib Dems (and Labour) at the next general election by taking Tory votes in key marginals.

UKIP is essentially the product of a civil war on the right of British politics, likely to be settled in favour of support for the complete withdrawal from the EU, a policy the Tories will eventually be forced to adopt. Once that happens, much clearer battle lines will have been established when it comes to the big divide.

The challenge for the Liberal Democrats is different. The same Guardian/ICM poll showed that only 49% of Lib Dem voters turned out in the Euro elections, suggesting that the most pro-European party had failed adequately to energise its own supporters.

Little wonder. The Lib Dem campaign focused on local issues or Iraq and, in so far as it mentioned Europe at all, on the party's support for a referendum, clearly a coded message intended to appease eurosceptic voters.

At a time when pro-European sympathy in Britain is at an all-time low, even the most pessimistic polls indicate a core pro-European vote of around one third of the electorate. If the Liberal Democrats abandon them, this large group of voters has nowhere else to turn. Why is the party not consolidating this natural support base, instead of joining all the other parties in a futile chase for the eurosceptic vote?

The natural Liberal support base is the enlightened bourgeoisie – people who are educated, cosmopolitan and comfortable in their own skins. This is a growing demographic; an increasing proportion of the population is better educated, and the 'British Social Attitudes' survey has shown a direct correlation between higher education and liberal (with a small 'l') attitudes. In contrast, the UKIP demographic is elderly, uneducated and shrinking. However bad things may seem now, social trends are on our side.

British Liberals need to recognise the battle lines now, not await their fate like liberals in America, who had to endure 25 years of defeat and retreat before Howard Dean emerged to re-energise their core support.

The coming divide is an opportunity, provided Liberals recognise it soon enough. The choice is what kind of society we want to be – forward looking, enlightened and cosmopolitan, or backward looking, boorish and parochial.

There can be no compromise, no happy medium. There will be a winner and loser. Liberals cannot sit on the fence or side with the opposition, or they will be wiped out. There is a Kulturkampf, whether we like it or not. We need the same passion and energy that eurosceptics bring to their cause, not mealy-mouthed apologies.

It's a myth that euroscepticism is due entirely to the Tory press. The commercial success of the position adopted by the anti-European press suggests they must have some traction with a section of public opinion.

It's a myth that we can go to the electorate arguing for the technical benefits of clause 43, sub-section (h), paragraph (vii) of the EU constitution. This isn't what the battle is about.

It's a myth that people don't like political arguments. Argument is what differentiates parties and provides people with a real choice. What people actually don't like is when all the mainstream parties look and sound the same.

A leader in the Observer (13 June) expressed the party's duty precisely: "We need the three principal parties to be clear what they stand for and to fight for coherent positions with integrity. Being all things to all men disaffects core support and benefits the fringe."

Liberals should therefore be promoting their core values of liberty, justice, enlightenment and internationalism. We must re-emphasise that economic welfare is a direct product of living in a stable democracy.

Still, there will be defeatists in the Liberal Democrats counselling an accommodation with grassroots conservatism. Heaven forbid that we might offend a small-town bigot, the braying county set, a bullet-headed Ingerlund supporter, a council estate lynch mob, or a Daily Express reader who starts every sentence with the words "In my day...". Why not? I say, fuck 'em.

Simon Titley is a member of the Liberator Collective

POURING PARAFIN ON REGULATIONS

The Liberal Democrat Treasury team is right to be sceptical about the usefulness of regulation, says Alan Sherwell

I would certainly oppose any moves towards a 'Thatcherite' or even a 'Heathite' economic policy by Liberal Democrats, although I have to say that such accusations coming from Labour politicians who advance 'top up fees' and Foundation Hospitals have to be taken with a pinch of salt. However, I do think that recent commentaries in Liberator and elsewhere really are too simplistic and particularly so when it comes to (de)-regulation.

As someone who worked on regulation in a heavily regulated industry for 20 years, sat on the CBI's Consumer Affairs Panel for six years and has been a trade unionist all my working life, I hope that I have some experience and insight relevant to this debate.

One problem is that people seem to see the call for deregulation as a call for a free-for-all in employment policy and practice when, in reality, it is rarely that.

Most responsible companies accept that anti-discrimination legislation and safety legislation are entirely appropriate but they will raise concerns about how they are monitored and enforced and the economically unproductive work that they have to do to demonstrate compliance.

Trading standards is another vexed area. All the colleagues that I met at the CBI, without exception, want rogue traders and folk who prey on pensioners put out of business but they have legitimate concerns about how enforcement operates.

If a trading standards officer goes to Tesco or Dixons every day for a week, they will find a small number of examples of mislabelling in contravention of the regulations. Neither of these companies has a policy of misinforming its customers but they have such a range of products that mistakes are inevitable. They are an easy and prominent target, whereas the fly-by-nights who Tarmac your drive aren't.

Reputable companies accept sensible regulation because they want crooks and shysters put out of business as much as you or I do. However, they want that regulation to be relevant, cost effective and subject to regular review.

I am told that Oliver Cromwell made it a criminal offence to wear a false nose on Christmas Day. Well, some of the regulation that is still around is barely more sensible: hardware stores have to stock firelighters; it is illegal to sell paraffin on a Sunday; you can buy a can of beer in the 'general store' at a petrol station but not if that petrol station happens to be on a motorway.

Admittedly, nobody is likely to enforce the first two and the only reason that they survive is that the government can't find time to abolish them, but surely hoping that nobody bothers to enforce the regulations is no way to run an economy.

There is a relatively straightforward set of tests as to whether a regulation is sensible:

- Is it proportionate – in other words, is the harm that it seeks to remedy sufficient to justify the restriction that it imposes?
- Is it cost effective – is the need to prevent or promote the thing regulated sufficient to justify the cost of implementing the regulation?
- Is there an easier way of achieving the same aim? and;
- In the case of existing regulations, is the aim still valid?

One of the crucial elements of the deregulatory agenda that the allegedly right-wing economics team has been advancing is the 'sunset clause', which would mean that all regulations lapsed after a fixed period unless renewed. This would get rid of nonsense about not selling paraffin on a Sunday and mean that discrimination legislation would be regularly reviewed and updated, both to take account of new scams and to simplify its application - both worthy results.

No Liberal could argue that there is no need to regulate trade in goods and services but commerce is faced with a bewildering raft of regulators acting independently and sometimes in conflict.

The Competition Act is interpreted separately and often differently by the Office of Fair Trading and the vast number of sectoral regulators that we now have. Much of this could be swept away – give the OFT responsibility for all competition issues because there is no reason for competition law to apply differently to telecoms, energy and food – and leave only sector specific matters to sectoral regulators.

Again, I found no argument at the CBI against laws enforcing fair trading practices. The debates were always about whether the particular laws or regulations were actually doing that and, if they were, were necessary and cost effective.

Certainly competition is not the answer to every economic problem (indeed, it is the cause of some) but it is surely a reasonable Liberal starting point that competition is likely to be better than its absence and if the absence of competition is the right answer then it is necessary to justify it on a case-by-case basis.

For instance, I have difficulty finding a Liberal argument for the government owning some motorway service areas and have no problem with the Treasury team wanting to sell them off.

A problem does arise when a guiding principle becomes a fetish and so it is with competition. Despite having been subject to competition for longer than any other incumbent telecoms operator outside the US, my former employer, BT, retains a larger share of the telephone call market than virtually any other ex-incumbent.

The competition fetishist will say that this is a bad thing and press for ever increasing regulation on BT to 'help' its competitors – putting up BT's costs and, therefore, prices and allowing those competitors to put their prices up too and, as a result, harming the interest of many consumers.

A realist may say that a proportion of BT's market share is due to inertia but, since that is true for other ex-incumbents, the rest might actually be because BT is the company that people want to be with and, hey, competition means that sometimes the big guy wins and sometimes they lose. Another analyst may say, well actually the competition is between fixed line and mobile and I don't figure that Vodafone needs protecting from BT!

The point of this little digression is that, when you interfere with the market, you have to be very clear about what you are doing, why you are doing it and what beneficial aim you are seeking to achieve. The reality is that the vast majority of interference in the market in the UK does not meet those requirements.

A further issue that needs to be considered is why is the market not a perfect economic model? In some cases, it is because the area concerned is a natural monopoly and competition is essentially artificial, in some cases it is because the activity should be in the hands of the state anyway (the Army for instance) but, most often, it is because the consumer is not fully informed – although this may, of course, be by choice. We can ban misleading advertising but we cannot legislate to require the purchaser to be informed – or, indeed, even to read the instructions after purchase.

So, although I have reservations about some of the stuff coming from the Treasury team, I see most of it as entirely consistent with the framework that I have tried to outline above.

In summary, it seems to me that a sensible policy would:

- strip away vast rafts of outdated and ineffective regulation that cost government and commerce alike;
- require all remaining regulation to be tested against principles of good regulation every five or so years;
- assume that competition was desirable unless there was evidence in the other direction; and
- ensure that the consumer has the opportunity to be informed and is protected from misinformation.

None of the above implies the removal of employment protection, anti-discrimination legislation, safety legislation, advertising standards regulation and all the rest of the rules that benefit the citizen as a consumer or the citizen as a producer/employee.

Of course, these regulations would have to meet the good regulation test too but we know that, for liberals, they pass the test of aiming to achieve a desirable outcome and, if there is a more cost effective and less bureaucratic way of achieving the same outcome, then why should we worry?

Finally, whether readers agree with what I have written or not, can I make a little plea that we try to debate these issues on their merits and not on simplistic references to the voodoo economics of 25 years ago.

Alan Sherwell is a Liberal Democrat councillor in Aylesbury and a former chair of the Federal Conference Committee

CLUELESS IN STRASBOURG

Liberal Democrat MEPs voted to protect the vested interests of large software companies instead of those of users. Alex Macfie asks why

"The EU tried to ban the World Wide Web" sounds like a classic Euromyth. Unfortunately, it happens to be true. The European Parliament voted in 1999 to include, in a directive on copyright protection, a clause that would have made every individual copy of anything on the WWW a potential copyright violation.

As the act of reading a web page makes a copy of it on every computer it passes through, the directive would have made the WWW illegal in the EU. It was amended in later stages, but the fact that it was considered at all is symptomatic of a deep problem in today's political climate, where 'intellectual property rights' can trump common sense. This directive is still widely disliked for imitating American copyright law by, for example, making it illegal to tinker with one's own electronic equipment to bypass timeouts and region locks, to play legitimately purchased DVDs or games.

Legislative cluelessness is in the interests of the main business players, particularly entertainment and software giants, who successfully lobby for broad protection. But last September, the major corporate interests were unexpectedly defeated in a European Parliamentary vote, on a directive on software patents.

In the US, patent protection has gradually been extended to cover subject matter such as software and business methods, previously thought to be unpatentable. Computer code is protected by copyright. In software, patents protect ideas and functionality. But since independent re-invention is so commonplace in software development, and the pace of development is so fast, such broad protection causes great concern among software developers. It can become illegal to publish programs that you yourself wrote.

One of the most notorious software patents is Amazon's patent on 'one-click purchasing', used by the e-retailer to threaten a competitor some years ago. But it is merely the tip of the iceberg. Patents cover many other basic ideas in e-commerce. Many of these are normal business practices that happen to be implemented on a computer or network (see http://webshop.ffii.org).

Of course, these are not genuine 'inventions', but proving it is difficult. The average cost of contesting an invalid patent is well over US$1.5 million, so most software developers faced with a patent infringement lawsuit choose to settle even if it is likely that they would ultimately win.

Patent offices encourage patent inflation, as they rely on fees from successful patent applications. Patent lawyers also relish the litigation opportunities provided by patents. Large software companies, such as IBM and Microsoft, use patents to threaten potential competitors. Companies hold many other software patents with no purpose other than litigation.

In Europe, software is in theory unpatentable. Virtually no-one claims to be in favour of software patents. The directive itself is advertised as a law to limit patentability. But careful reading of the European Commission's version showed that it would give legal force to more than 30,000 software patents (on what they call 'computer-implemented inventions') already granted by the European Patent Office, whose current practice on software patenting is virtually indistinguishable from that of US.

The European Parliament's position was largely the result of lobbying by individual software developers, who encouraged MEPs to read between the lines. Economists also expressed concern that making patents too easily available harms innovation (see http://www.researchineurope.org).

The Commission and the Council of Ministers oppose the European Parliament's amendments. Commissioner Frits Bolkestein has threatened to withdraw the directive if the Parliament stands by them. The unelected bodies are subject to heavy lobbying by large corporations, and are dominated by patent officials who ignore real-world concerns. If copyright or patent law could be misused to prevent free competition, they argue, then that is the concern of the competition authorities, not copyright or patent law. But it is relatively easy to threaten an alleged 'intellectual property' violator, while competition law is very slow acting – the EU's recent investigation into Microsoft took five years.

Many politicians, particularly on the arch-capitalist right, believe that the issue is about protection of 'property rights'. Perhaps the one thing right-wingers make a fetish of more than the 'free market' is property rights. But so-called 'intellectual property' is not like physical property. Its enforcement requires an extensive system of government regulation and bureaucracy.

So, contrary to traditional notions of left versus right, the 'interventionists' tend to come from the right (although not exclusively so – the software patenting directive was piloted by UK Labour MEP Arlene McCarthy). The radical and green left emerge as the true supporters of the free market and opponents of red tape.

Radical liberals should take a similar view. D66 and the Swedish liberal MEPs already do, but the ELDR group is split. For the Liberal Democrats, the issue was addressed

in the 2003 policy document 'Making IT Work', which is sceptical of the current trend of 'intellectual property inflation'. On software patents, the point is made that innovation in software is driven by competition, not statutory monopolies. The policy also pledges to challenge the misuse of 'intellectual property' laws to distort markets.

At the national level, the party, through Richard Allan MP, is fully behind its policy. Nearly all UK Labour (against the majority of their European Socialist colleagues) and Conservative MEPs slavishly support the patent movement, so this would seem to be a perfect opportunity for the Liberal Democrat MEPs to advance a distinctive policy.

They missed a trick. Diana Wallis, the Liberal Democrats' lead spokesperson on legal issues, paid lip service to party policy principles on software patents in her conference speech last autumn. But two days later, she and other voting Liberal Democrat MEPs, following the Dutch right-wing liberals, voted against clear limits to patentability. They appear to believe that any directive, however flawed, is better than no directive at all.

But this is the one chance to shape the EU's legal framework on software patents. Get it wrong now, and it will be very difficult to correct it later. Furthermore, there is little room for compromise on the issue. One reason is that leaving open five back doors to software patents is not a meaningful compromise between closing all doors and leaving open ten doors. But another is that the patent movement does not compromise in good faith. Their so-called 'compromises' are just cleverly reworded versions of the patent-permissive original. Through a similar fake compromise, MEPs were tricked into voting for gene patents in 1998.

It is clear from the September vote that many MEPs change their minds when encouraged to think about the issues. But in March this year, a directive on 'intellectual property rights enforcement' was rushed through the European Parliament by a two-thirds majority, with the support of nearly all Liberal Democrat MEPs. Its stated intent is to fight organized piracy and counterfeiting, but its scope much broader than necessary or useful for this purpose. As with software patents, this is in the interests of big business and professional litigators, but not in the wider public interest. And as with software patents, the unelected EU bodies would rather withdraw the directive than accept any limitations.

These include unannounced dawn raids on suspected infringers, and freezing of assets – before the case is discussed in court. Such sweeping powers are open to abuse and need very clear limits. But in the directive there are none. Mostly, their use is not even explicitly limited to cases of commercial, or intentional, infringement. They are not restricted to criminal cases. They could be used in civil cases – without the safeguards of criminal law, such as the presumption of innocence. They could be used against not only providers, but also users of allegedly infringing material (secondary infringement). They can be used in patent as well as copyright and trademark cases. This is inappropriate due to the complexity of patent-infringement cases and the guilty-until-proven-innocent nature of patent law.

Professional litigators would be handed yet more legal bludgeoning tools, to shut down legitimate businesses, even where they do not have a case in law. One potential beneficiary is SCO, the company using weak allegations of copyright infringement against Linux to sue end-users of the operating system.

Yet amendments excluding patents, limiting the directive's scope to commercial, intentional infringement and providing for punitive action against abusers of the law were all defeated, with Liberal Democrat help.

The directive's rapporteur, French conservative MEP Janelly Fourtou (the wife of a media-conglomerate CEO), had fast-tracked the directive, ostensibly so that it would be in place before the EU's enlargement. This conveniently meant that there was little chance for debate. Of course, fighting counterfeiting and piracy is necessary. But it cannot really be so important that basic legal safeguards should be swept aside, to protect commercial interests. Nor could it possibly be so important or urgent that there need be no serious discussion. Laws made this way are invariably bad news.

The effect of this directive is greatly dependent on its implementation in member states. But there is little hope in the UK, where the UK Patent Office dictates policy, usually without even a debate in Parliament. The UK Patent Office, through its mouthpiece in the government, has consistently argued at the Council against clear limits on software patentability, and it gold-plated the copyright directive's UK implementation. In any case, if the EU decides copyright and patent law, then the necessary safeguards should also be an EU responsibility and not left to the goodwill of national patent offices.

The issue of how best to protect the legitimate interests of authors and inventors must be taken out of the hands of patent officials and those who stockpile large amounts of 'intellectual property'. The practice of uncritically accepting advice of patent offices on matters of patent and copyright law must end. MEPs should not give in to blackmail from unelected bodies.

The 'intellectual property' movement worldwide has become a giant vested interest, similar to the trade unions in 1970s Britain. It is necessary for democratically elected politicians to stand up to this unelected movement and put some balance into the debate.

Alex Macfie is a Liberal Democrat who specialises in copyright issues.

EATING THE GREENS

Alex Wilcock says that the Liberal Democrats ignore the growing Green vote at their peril

The Liberal Democrats have spent so long fighting to make the two-party battle a three-party one that it seems unfair to have to watch over our shoulders at fourth, fifth and sixth parties. The truth is, though, that as well as working out our strategic position versus Labour and the Tories, one smaller party is both a problem and an opportunity for us – and it's not the permatanned media darlings of the moment, either.

The pages of Liberator frequently see arguments that the Liberal Democrats need to target Labour voters more than those of any other party. While Labour has a lot more to lose (and is showing signs of losing it), both my gut reaction and local experience says that argument's oversimplistic.

I stood in a seat with a large Labour majority at the last election, so attracting former Labour voters was my key aim. But like many other candidates opposing Labour, the Labour majority itself wasn't the biggest problem. We've all claimed to be in a 'two-horse race'; in Leyton and Wanstead, at least the local elections made us strong challengers, as shown in a helpful graph on every leaflet. Unfortunately, voters don't always notice that a national election is divided into local chunks, and I lost count of the number of voters who told me they wanted to vote for me, but a much bigger two-horse race had seen me off – even in a seat where Margaret Thatcher didn't stand an earthly at her height, they were terrified they'd let the Tories back in.

If anyone objects to Mark Oaten's self-appointed role as gloater-in-chief at Tory misfortunes, bear in mind that for us to tear large chunks off Labour, the Tories have to be seen as losers. Yes, it's silly to say that we only want Tory voters, which sounds too opportunistic (today's favourite political swear-word), too establishment and too like Tony Blair (today's other favourite political swear-word). But they're our first target to get others.

When the Lab vote goes down and the Tories stand still, we're the winners but the headlines are that the Tories have narrowed Labour's lead, even when they've plainly had nothing to do with it (keep repeating they've just had their worst vote since 1832. That might help).

If the Tories look like challengers… Some people will back them because they like winners; soft Tories will harden; our own seats will look besieged; and, where we take the fight to Labour, soft Labour voters will be scared back, even in areas where the Tories never stand any chance. Of course appeal to soft Tories by hammering the Labour Party rather than trying to sound as Thatcherite as Tony Blair, but only when the Tories collapse do Labour voters feel safe.

It was Labour's heaviest weapon against me and many others on the doorstep in 2001, and Ken Livingstone's victory speech was the dry run for the most effective Blairite general election message – the Tories are on the way back, hide your grannies and orphans and be very afraid. "I could have done without that last-minute poll," he lied with a straight face as he talked up the Conservatives, knowing that that improbable fear is the last best hope for another thumping majority.

The usefulness of the Tory bogeyman in getting the Labour vote out isn't the only thing you'd notice if you looked at recent elections in Leyton and Wanstead, though. Even more obvious than listening on the doorsteps is watching the actual votes. When voters do decide to let go of Labour, we need to catch the bulk of them, but that's got its modern complications, too.

We used to attract protest votes on any old thing – now we don't, probably for two reasons, which are both good and bad: we've been more successful, so we look more establishment and don't get so many anti-establishment 'give them all a kicking' votes; and we've got more of an ideological profile, which is bound to turn some people off, particularly where there are other viable options that result in our vote literally halving between two sets of elections on the same day.

Rather than try and revert to being all things to all people and run round after the likes of UKIP, we should identify which of the ex-Labour votes are likely to share similar views to ours, and go after them. Of the minor parties, it's the Greens that we're best-suited to taking votes back from, and before you dismiss them as too small to bother with, I'd like to share my second Leyton observation. In the Waltham Forest wards of the constituency in the 2002 London locals, Liberal Democrats topped the poll, but won only seven councillors to Labour's 11. The small, ignorable Green vote never had a hope, yet if we'd attracted it instead, we'd have more than doubled our seats to 15.

Nationwide, the pattern is becoming uncomfortably reliable. In every PR election, Greens are polling strongly to the detriment of the Lib Dem share, but they're also building up under first past the post. We've shown we can win anywhere but, with different electoral systems, it's more difficult to show the Greens as a wasted vote either. Their local results show their effect as spoilers where they manage to try, and similarly a small number are now sticking with them even at a general election, where they grow even when squeezed.

The Green vote seems to be tidal, coming in further under proportional representation and falling back without it, but each time finishing a little further up the beach. It helps that the media give them an easy ride and report uncritically the most misleading Green spin instead of treating their spurious claims with the same cynicism as the rest of us.

Look at the 2004 local elections, where reporters uncritically parroted the big bright Green spin machine that they had 10% of the vote and great gains, without noticing that both the national vote tallies and seats won showed this was a lie.

It's easy to "gain 10% in the seats where they stood" if they only stand in their strong areas, but ridiculous to then say "and extended to a national vote share this would mean…"

Well, here's news. With elections across most of the country, the much smaller vote they actually received was their national vote share; it wasn't a by-election that needed extrapolation, and if they were too unpopular, incompetent or afraid to stand in most places, other people shouldn't add extra votes as if they had. Similarly, their "really good gains" saw them win a bit over 20 councillors on June 10th, as opposed to a bit over 1200 Liberal Democrats, not that you'd guess from their fawning media coverage.

Even the Greens recognise that their main job is to eat into the votes we'd normally expect, if their record of spending more time attacking the Lib Dems than any other national party is anything to go by.

After so many years of campaigning for proportional representation, it's ironic that our focussed, small-scale electoral techniques are so ill-suited to it. List systems in particular are a great opportunity for an impulse vote based on a couple of simple words rather than any actual work, and to a number of people 'Green' (or 'UK Independence') just pushes their button, even if a 'name says it all' brand may never break through to the big league. In the Scottish Parliament, for example, Greens are efficiently nicking several issues that in any other situation would be ours.

For any who doubt that the Greens are chasing our sort of territory, we've come fourth in Euro-elections before, and much more damagingly, in the first elections I worked in after joining the party. Back in 1989, we were busy imploding, and the Greens simply filled the vacuum, carving a niche they still hold in the very Southern areas where we now need a little extra boost to keep pace against the Tories, and remember that Tory conservationists are as likely to be tempted by Greenery as Labour left-wingers. It's not rocket science to see that as an opportunity.

There are grounds for optimism in this year's votes, too, with us gaining slightly at the Greens' expense in London elections (5 against 2 sounds so much better than 4 against 3) and the Greens making no further progress for Europe. In the London Euro-seat, we got just a handful of votes less than twice the Green result, and but for that that handful would have taken a second seat, either from them or Labour.

How, then, can we encourage more voters to come to us and not the Greens? We work hard and they come out of nowhere without deserving it, but no party has any votes by right, and we've done enough sniggering at other large parties' wails of "It's not fair!" to know that that's not going to get us very far. There are national and local answers.

On a national level, the two main options are to hammer away at the environment as 'our' issue or to attack the Greens directly. As with the Tories and UKIP, direct attacks would do more harm than good; I love to put the boot in, but the voters don't love to watch it, and it makes them seem bigger than they are. Some might say the same of talking up the issue, but the facts speak for themselves - it's already a decider for a lot of voters, and if we don't appeal to them, others will, which could just make the difference in your seat, too.

It's on a national level that the Lib Dem message is pretty good. Charles Kennedy's first 'ordinary' conference leader's speech after his initial 'thank you and hello' made the environment its main thrust, and he's made a number of major speeches since. Perhaps because of an awkward lack of a populist buzz-word ending in 'y', 'Green-y' didn't join 'Freedom, Justice, Honesty' on our 2001 general election manifesto cover, but we've used the superior 'Free, Green and Fair' since, and we have a much better record of translating the environment into catchy voter appeal than we do individual freedom, though the two are intertwined. Freedom needs good health, which must be safeguarded by a decent environment both for people today and for future generations.

That manifesto included 'Green Action' boxes on every issue, some more appropriate than others, but all putting across the importance of the subject, and Friends of the Earth gave it 37.5 out of 50, against Labour's "feeble" 23 and the Tories' appalling 6.5, with the Greens only just ahead on 42. Other pressure groups at other times regularly give us 9/10 to the Greens' 10/10 and, while I often question that, if the Greens do have a good policy we've not thought of, let's nick it. Particularly with the Government putting several of our own environmental policies into practice, what was radical a decade ago can't afford to stand still – how about, for example, promoting research on more efficient methods of large-scale electrical storage, to fend off the nuclear industry's attack on renewables?

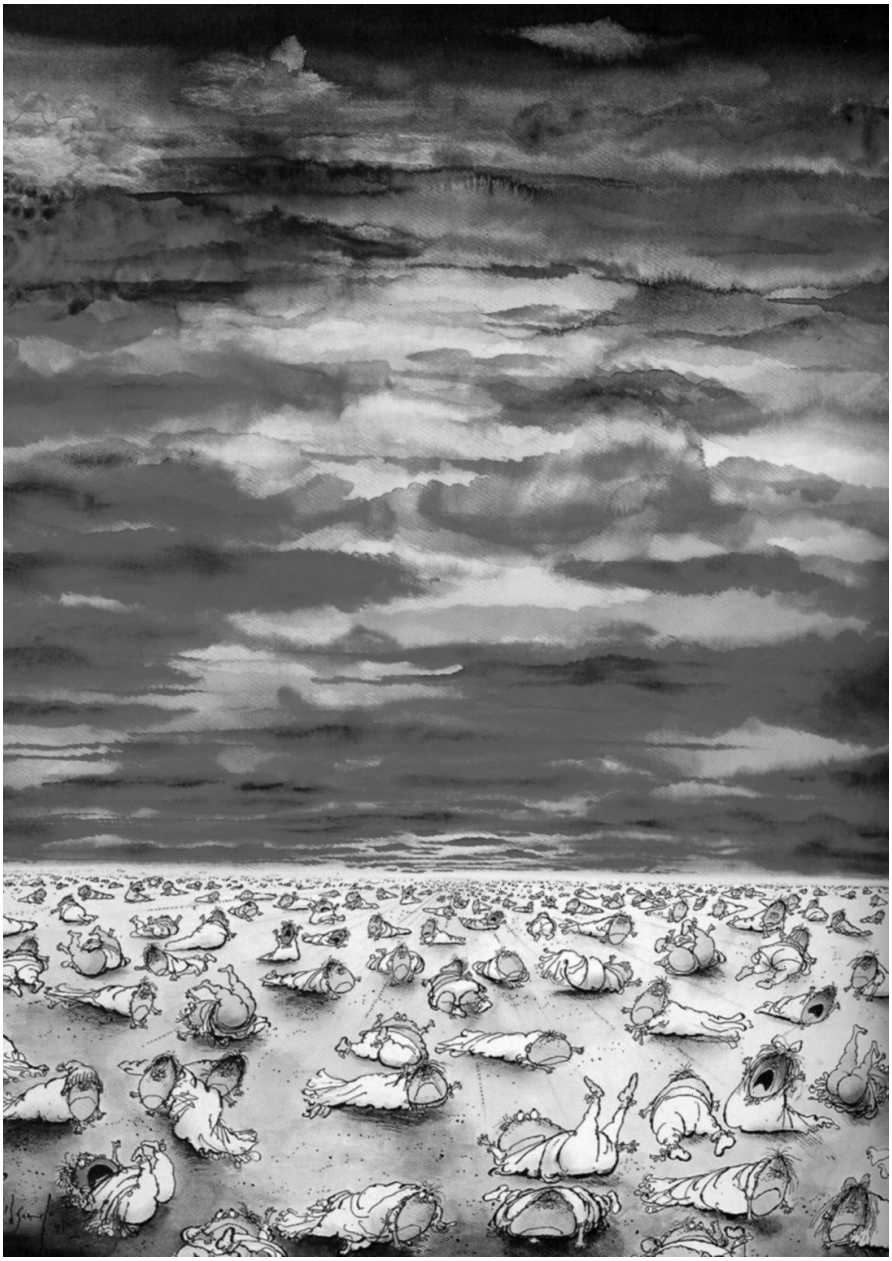
In the 2004 European elections, we had the same Green Boxes in the manifesto and, when we weren't talking about Iraq, we were talking green much more than anything else, including in precious PPB time. The trouble with all this, as with so much of the Lib Dems' national message, is that journalists simply aren't interested in reporting it.

That brings us to the local approach. FOCUS was adopted around the time I was born to get our message into homes when the media ignored us, and has been fantastically successful. The concentration on local issues where others arrogantly ignore them is rightly praised, but when it's still often the only way that people see a Liberal Democrat message, there's a value-added boost available from national messages that often gets lost.

It's easy to make the mistake of one leaflet on entirely national issues that fail to pick up on local loyalties, and another with an all-local message that fails to move people with a national or international agenda, and I've made both mistakes in my time.

The party's attempts at integrated campaigning have never been able to get us all singing from the same hymn sheet (mostly that's a good thing, too). But if I could tour the country and urge one thing on every Liberal Democrat leaflet that ever rolls off the presses – apart from a graph that shows why we're best-placed to beat our main opponents, of course – it's a box marked 'Green Action' that should always, always be there.

It's not as if most FOCUSes don't have environmental action on them already. How many don't have rubbish in the streets, or the buses, or the water supply, or recycling, or abandoned cars, or traffic jams, or cuts to the trains? But if you give them the same 'Green Action' tag every single time, coupled with local headlines within that, there'll be an added value of people concerned with 'the environment' in general that right now we miss, quite unnecessarily, because they don't make the connection. To paraphrase the old slogan, we're brilliant at acting locally, but you rarely see much global thinking in a FOCUS, holiday snapshots of Tony and George notwithstanding.



We have to talk environment all year round and in big headlines, so that drip by drip we establish ourselves as the natural choice for action on the environment (contrasting silently with the Greens' mere protest), perhaps with a strapline at the bottom of each box just to make sure everyone gets the message, "The party for action on the environment, not just hot air". If you have a lean month, pick a Lib Dem environment policy, or national press release, or something your MSP, GLAM, MEP or the like has said; you'll never run short, and it'll never require an entire indigestible policy paper. Look out for anything on transport, or heating in poor housing, or animal welfare, or GM and other food scares, or overseas aid, or farming, or flooding, or clean air.

Above all, link the environment to health, still usually the number one issue in the polls: 'Green action to help our health'; 'Pollution means diseases like asthma have shot up in our area'; 'Tackle the causes of ill health - poverty, pollution and preventable illness'. Oh, yes – and print your FOCUS on recycled paper, and say so, every time.

The important thing is, tap away at that Green vote without a single pause, because if you wait until election time they will always trump us. It's their name. Because they're a vote that we're uniquely suited to compete for, they're the only 'minor party' you should really consider putting on every canvass sheet, and target them ruthlessly once you've found them, with a different and less local message than anyone else. Too many Lib Dems just put down a Green as 'Probable Us', and life's not that simple.

I've made a case from electoral concerns, but the environment is one of the main things that brought me into the Lib Dems in the first place, and I believe a Lib Dem government would do a better job on it than any other party, Greens included.

Give people power to make their own small-scale decisions instead of banning everything in sight with preaching and overregulation. Make the market do the job instead of ripping it up and starting again. Make the EU do a better job instead of ripping that up and starting again in bizarre Euroscepticism that makes Tory proposals seems realistic and embarrasses even the Greens' European partners.

These are just a few of the reasons why we shouldn't be ashamed to say we're the best, bar none. But for those who'd still put the Greens first, there are tactical cases, practical cases and sheer familiarity to try. Stick a 'Green Action' box on every FOCUS you ever deliver, and give us that extra boost.

Alex Wilcock is Vice-Chair of the Lib Dem Federal Policy Committee, and fought Leyton and Wanstead in the 2001 General Election

WHY I AM STILL A LIBERAL

It is a hard thing to be, becasue one must accept that freedom is paramount and diversity healthy, says David Grace

I met a lesbian on a train to Brussels. I met her because she sat right opposite me and started reading Paddy Ashdown's diaries. I took pity and rescued her and we had a conversation.

She had, she told me, been a Euro-Communist as a student but, having met lots of Liberals, she had now become a Liberal. This was not easy, she confessed. It had actually been harder to come out as a Liberal than as a lesbian.

I came out as a Liberal in 1974. I came out of the Labour Party, because of Europe, because of incomes policy, because of the environment, because the Chief Whip of the Liberal Party (David Steel) attended late-night Young Liberal caucuses whereas the Chief Whip of the Labour Party (Bob Mellish) only mentioned the Young Socialists when he wanted to swear. It was Brighton - the Liberal Assembly of 1974 – heady days (and nights).

I joined the Liberal Party but, if I am honest, I wasn't a Liberal. I was, although I didn't know it at the time, a Social Democrat. In those pre-Thatcher days, we all had much higher hopes of the role of the state. Seven years later a Social Democrat Party was created but by that time I had become a Liberal. I voted for the Alliance but after another seven years, I voted against the merger.

To the many who have discovered the Liberal Democrat Party since then, this is all archaeology and my views have "gotta be mediaeval". Just stop digging, you might say. But I'm sorry, I can't pretend that two different things are actually one and the same nor that some magical Hegelian synthesis has produced a third thing, which is better than either. I am stuck with Alan Beith's formula when he stood for the leadership, "I am a Liberal, I am a member of the [Social and] Liberal Democrats".

To my slightly political friends, I give the soundbite: A Liberal is an anarchist who has compromised with reality, a Social Democrat is a socialist who has compromised with reality. But you, dear Liberator reader, deserve more. Liberals begin with the freedom of the individual and, when they have compromised with reality a bit, they should end with it too. It is not a question of balancing liberty and equality. If you are serious about freedom, yes you will require the state to do something to help all individuals to have the chance of a greater freedom than Carlyle's freedom to sleep under a bridge. (But you will also allow that freedom. On a recent visit to Scandinavia, home of social democracy, I heard the case of some alcoholics living squalidly in an isolated hut. The social workers arrived :

"We've come to help you"

"It's all right. We don't need any help."

"No. Society has let you down. We must help you to lead a normal life."

"Society hasn't let us down."

"Yes it has."

"No, it hasn't. We like living like this. Go away.")

There are many problems with pursuing equality but two will do. Firstly, even the harshest communist dictatorships have never achieved it. It can't be done and, secondly if it could, it would be terrible, because it would destroy all liberty and that great flower of liberty – diversity. You cannot tell if two different things are equal, if the man with a television is equal to the man with a book or with a rugby ball. You cannot do it by monetary value – how do you balance living in Lambeth with living in Durham, or Cornwall, or Skye. If you think this is abstract theorising, look carefully at how the New Labour government runs education, health or local government. The drive to equate becomes inevitably a drive to homogenise. For a civil servant or a Number 10 wunderkind, you can only be equal when you are the same. So we have a national curriculum, performance indicators, best value and the whole theology of targets. And if a school or a hospital or a social services department should deviate from the prescribed parameters of performance, what's the solution ? Bring in a new central government agency or contractor. The drive to sameness replaces any genuine concern for social justice.

To me, the point of freedom is the freedom to be different. Diversity is not just an individual good but the key to a healthy society. The current obsession with nationally imposed standards will impoverish us all. I take the example of education authorities. At one time (roughly, pre-Shirley Williams), they had great autonomy. There was a great variety of provision around the country and when one currently fashionable educational theory failed, areas that failed with it could look elsewhere in the country for viable alternatives. But when everyone is (compulsorily) doing the same and the theory fails, everyone fails and there is nowhere to go. It is like the problem of a monoculture in crops. If everyone grows the same variety of wheat, they will all fail when one particular blight comes along. Without variety there can be no selection and no evolution. Choice is not simply a luxury for the rich but a real necessity for society.

A word about experts, by which I mean not the man who can (and does) tell you why one car (computer, voting system) is better than another for your needs, but

the man who then says that you must have this because I am the expert, I know what you need and I know better than you. Expertise rather than serving choice so often serves to deny it. When you combine the man who knows best with the man who wants to make things the same for everyone, you have, in my view, the heart of social democracy. And guess what? That man is in charge of Britain today.

Liberalism is often caricatured and misrepresented, both in France where they don't understand it (there was once briefly a French Liberal Party during the Third Republic led by the aptly named Monsieur Bourgeois) and in the United States where it means at least two completely different things.

The French have a strong faith in reason, which they associate with René Descartes. They really believe that an intellectual in Paris can define what is right for the whole country. Thus they attempted to set priorities for every road junction in the country according to one guiding principle, priorité à droit. It didn't work and had to be accompanied by many exceptions. Their idea of religious freedom turns out to be forbidding religious symbols at school. The word Liberal is generally used in a derogatory way to describe someone who rejects social cohesion and collective action.

The confusion between different kinds of liberal in the United States has led to the description "neo-liberalism" which may be a neologism but is not liberalism. Traditionally liberal meant Democrats of the Edward Kennedy school (school of thought, not of driving), whose views were close to the British Liberal Party. These people believed that freedom should include freedom from poverty, ignorance and conformity and that the state had a role in helping to promote such freedom. The neo-liberals on the other hand have absorbed a little classical (or is it neo-classical?) economics. Like Margaret Thatcher, they do not believe in society. They believe in freedom so strongly that they are prepared to bomb and shoot people to force them to be free. They really believe that you can impose freedom. I don't.

Traditionally people attempt to put political opinions on a single axis from left to right. If you are left, you favour collective action and limit the individual, especially in economic matters. If you are right, you favour individual action and limit the state. I have believed for a long time that this dichotomy between individualism and collectivism is false. The individual and society are not opposites but two aspects of the same thing. The analogy of the word and the sentence illustrates the point. The meaning of a word depends upon its role in the sentence but the meaning of the sentence depend upon the words. Meanings change through usage by the whole language community, not because of a decision of the Academie Francaise. All societies need collective action and find ways of organising it. In authoritarian societies, the state or the church organises it. In liberal ones, volunteers organise it in a multitude of different ways, some of them commercial but not all.

Liberalism is a hard creed to follow, and I still believe it is a creed or, if you prefer, an ideology. It combines an analysis of society with a set of aims and methods for achieving them. It has something to say about the role of governments and individuals. It does not say, "Look after yourself and don't expect anyone, especially the state, to help" – the guiding theme of Conservatism over the years. It does not say, "Don't worry. The state will look after you" – the inspiration of socialism now transmuted into "Don't worry. The state will tell you what to do and how and when to do it in precisely defined quantities".

Liberalism asks each of us to think for ourselves and to work for each other. It accepts the incommensurability of individual desires and the value of diversity to society. It is the practical working out of liberty. I leave you with William Hazlitt: "The love of liberty is the love of others, the love of power is the love of ourselves."

David Grace is a former Liberal parliamentary candidate and is now a consultant on European Union issues.

A LIBERAL MIDDLE EAST

Donnachadh McCarthy describes a small breakthrough from the Liberal Democrat spring conference fringe meeting

The New Radicalism fringe meeting at the Southport federal conference 'Palestine/Israel: Liberal Answers?' had its impetus from the extraordinary rumpus caused by the statement by Jenny Tonge MP, that we needed to understand the reasons some Palestinians are resorting to the appalling violence of suicide bombing if we were to find the route to peace.

It was jointly sponsored with Liberator and Liberal International British Group and was addressed by Paul Usiskin, chair of the British section of the Jewish peace campaigning group Peace Now (Liberator 295), Anas Altikriti, president of the Muslim Association of Britain, Chris Dunham, a peace monitor from the International Solidarity Movement, and Jenny Tonge.

I was really disappointed that the response of the party leadership was to sack Tonge summarily by telephone within hours of the news emerging. The appropriate response would have been to seize the opportunity to place liberal answers at the front of the agenda. The leadership having missed the opportunity, I resolved to organise the meeting because liberalism has much to offer in tackling this dreadfully complex problem.

There is right on both sides. The Israelis are right in stating that, following centuries of persecution, they deserve a safe place to live free from the threat of genocide, and the Palestinians are right that they should not have their land invaded and taken from them by force.

So with two conflicting rights, how should liberalism respond? The liberal traditions of internationalism, secularism and the search for peace through dialogue have immense contributions to make.

As long as people identify with being Jewish, Israeli, Muslim or Palestinian above their common humanity, then solutions will be hard to build. Liberals should seek to build bridges between such people and to promote their common human identities over their religious or ethnic identities.

New Radicalism invited speakers who did not support violence from both sides, to promote such dialogue.

Paul Usiskin, who has campaigned tirelessly for peace, opened the meeting and laid out some of the key points of conflict, and advocated a two-state solution.

Chris Dunham recounted his experiences in Palestine where he had been shot while acting as a peace monitor and had a perspective of the Israeli government that would be seen as more pro-Palestinian than would be comfortable in many Liberal Democrat circles.

Anas Altikriti then gave a powerful argument for a one-state solution. Jenny Tonge gave a comprehensive account of how she was advocating the understanding of what motivated suicide bombers as an essential step to addressing the causes of the violence and how to end it.

The audience (which contained many prominent Jewish members of the party) then made some insightful comments, including Valerie Silbiger who pointed out the substantial peace movement that already existed among Israeli Jews and Sarah Ludford MEP who opposed the proposal from Jenny Tonge that the Sharon government should be subject to economic sanctions from the EU in response to its abuse of Palestinian human rights.

I was determined to find some common ground and was delighted when LIBG chair Robert Woodthorpe-Browne hosted a post-meeting reception to which I encouraged both sides to come to.

I mused that, ideally, people would live in the region in a secular state that respected the rights of all its citizens, whatever their ethnicity or religion, but that I understood that this could take more than a century and that in the meantime a two-state solution may be necessary.

To my astonishment, and I believe theirs, both the Jewish and Muslim speakers enthusiastically agreed that that was also their position. The two speakers resolved that they should seek to share platforms to demonstrate the possibility of mutual understanding to their respective members of the community.

I came out stunned at what liberalism could achieve even in such a modest setting. The following weeks, however, were darkened first by the assassination of leading Hamas figures and spiritual leaders by the Israeli government, and then by the endorsement by Tony Blair and George Bush of a unilateral declaration by the Israeli government of the retention of significant Jewish settlements on the West Bank, in return for the complete withdrawal from Gaza, without Palestinians even having the courtesy of consultation. This was followed by the destruction of the homes of thousands of people in Rafah, sowing yet more hatred and extremism that will need to be healed.

I am proud that Jenny Tonge succeeded in placing the plight of the Palestinians and the Israeli victims of the suicide bombings centre stage in our party's foreign policy debates. I hope, however, that in future our party leaders will be more enlightened and will capitalise on future opportunities to put our liberal values at the centre of the debate on the future of Israel/Palestine.

Donnachadh McCarthy organises New Radicalism and is a former deputy chair of the Liberal Democrat Federal Executive

IF VOTING MADE ANY DIFFERENCE...

It does, and apathetic voters are failing in their duty to society, says Phil Brennan

As the Euro and council elections pass, attention is again focusing on 'voter apathy' and what to do about it.

We are all familiar with the typical responses of the politically apathetic. The most common is that voting never seems to change anything, together with some additional, obligatory remarks about dishonest politicians and the over-prevalence of 'spin'. However, while there may be some truth in the latter, neither are in themselves good reasons for abdicating one's civic responsibilities, of which political participation is one.

There are two forms that the typical response invariably takes. The first involves the classic mistake of thinking that, just because I am a single person with a single vote, I cannot influence the direction of politics.

This involves the false assumption that, because I am not able to change or influence everything, I cannot change or influence something, however slight my contribution might seem, and that that something cannot be valuable to the total outcome. In fact, one's personal contribution to the total result is of great significance, as anybody who has worked on a complex and highly differentiated production line will be able to testify.

Many people tell me they believe in democracy, yet they still do not vote. But if one believes in democracy, one is committed, by simple force of logic, to voting.

Those who enjoy the benefits which arise from living in a democratic society and yet fail to vote, are contradicting their own commitments. Perhaps this position is understandable to some extent as the benefits are often not recognised until they are taken away. This could be alleviated by better political education.

There is also the issue of the conscientious objector, who might bemoan the lack of real democracy in our present political structures and abstain on those grounds. However, perceived lack of democracy in the current set of arrangements is really an argument for more rather than less political participation and so does not really wash.

The second form of apathetic response arises from the perceived lack of distinction between the main parties and the perception that political decisions never make a difference to the lives of ordinary folk. This is also based on a false assumption that, just because I personally do not immediately experience a major transformation in my life circumstances, that no difference has been made. The roots of this error lie in a culture which arguably promotes, to too great an extent, the vices of immediate gratification and rampant individualism.

We have come to expect that everything we want and desire should be delivered to us right away. This is inconsistent with the fact that the impact of many policy decisions are often not seen or felt for a long time after implementation.

The policy decision to have citizen studies as part of the national curriculum, for example, will not result in a dramatic change in my own or my family's fortunes overnight. If successful though, it would result in the gradual emergence of a new generation of adults who took civic responsibilities more seriously. There would be all kinds of knock-on effects from this. Perhaps we would see a reduction of mindless vandalism, of football hooliganism and of crime and anti-social behaviour, as well as more widespread participation in civic life, both political and non political.

Individualism encourages people to measure social and political change by the impact it has directly on me.

Measuring political outcome only in terms of its impact on me (or my pocket) undermines the principle and practice of solidarity –the idea that my own well-being is inextricably tied up with that of others – which is itself the basis of a well functioning society.

Why should I be concerned about the hardship of pensioners when I am not one myself? Why should I be concerned about the fortunes of oppressed and tortured peoples when those peoples bear no immediate relation to me? An adequate and enlightened response to those questions can only begin to be formulated when one comes to understand the principle of solidarity, something which a too highly individualistic culture makes hard to achieve.

Those currently disposed to apathy should look at the current situation on the US and the so-called war on terror. Nobody can be in any doubt that George W Bush has had a major impact on the world. The more indirect and longer lasting impact of Bush policy has yet to be seen. What kind of impact will the arguably highly dangerous doctrine of pre-emptive military action have on wider world stability, for example? The answer to this might only be available to our children and their children. But that doesn't or shouldn't make it any the less my concern.

This is not to lay all the responsibility for enlightened political participation on the individual. Political conscientiousness and feelings of civic responsibility are cultivated rather than genetically given and this means, among other things, formulating educational policy so as to promote both.

Phil Brennan is a postgraduate student at Liverpool University and a member of Amnesty International.

LOCAL SERVICE

Cabinets encourage councillors to play at being at Westminster, says Andrew Hudson

The experience of New Labour and its supposedly inclusive agenda, particularly regarding constitutional reform and local government, has made me seriously query the point in voting in elections other than at a national level.

We have to ask seriously whether the main results of Labour have been a career structure for political activists unable to make the grade for Westminster, and whether much of the other legislation has done more than provide lucrative employment for lawyers.

The growth in salaried employment for politicians outside Westminster seems to have resulted in less not more public accountability, with a disinclination to accept responsibility for running anything directly as services are outsourced.

This is particularly noticeable in local government, where cabinet government is becoming the norm, effectively providing local politicians with the opportunity of playing at being at Westminster. As services are increasingly being privatised, the public has little input and the politicians are not responsible, but the contractors are. Yet there appears to be a marked reluctance to terminate contracts.

In our own party, the consumer is regarded as paramount yet the interests of the consumer are not always identical with those of society as a whole, particularly when championing the consumer means pandering to instant gratification culture. Tony Blair's attempts to reorganise public services will fail because targets and controls will not tackle the problems.

Targets will distort service delivery when public service managers seek to meet them and, in some cases, result in doctored statistics.

Gimmicks such as directly elected mayors, electronic voting, postal voting and voting in supermarkets will not increase turnout in the long run, when the electorate realises that they will not result in, for example, the buses running on time or open public lavatories at night. One of the problems lies in the instant gratification approach to politics and the reluctance of politicians to present the public with the truth.

Public services cost money and providing services for small communities is costly, so the solution adopted is to tell the inhabitants that they are being empowered when in fact they are being told that, if they want services, they will have to run them themselves. As Abraham Lincoln put it, you can't fool all of the people all of the time. If politicians stopped trying to pass off decisions that adversely affect people as favours, they might restore the incentive to vote.

And what of the Liberal Democrat alternative? Some groups pride themselves in being more New Labour than Labour. There are exceptions, such as in Liverpool, where the council successfully resisted schools privatisation and the leadership has recognised that it is not public services but their management that is a problem.

In practice, we have very little guiding policy and tend to be obsessed with the means of winning elections, forgetting the end, which should be more than gaining power. In two by-elections in the borough where I live, the intensity of canvassing and repetitive knocking up was almost intimidatory; if postal voting gives people a bit of piece and quiet, it may not be such a bad thing. As we support local democracy, policies in some areas will vary from authority to authority but, unless you are the type of ALDC anorak who can't see beyond the next focus, the obsession with means rather than ends is worrying and as bad as New Labour's concern with style rather than substance.

The only thing everyone seems to agree on is neighbourhood councils, or do we? Policy papers support them and Tower Hamlets, where we lost control, is often cited, but no one mentions Richmond or Sutton where we maintained successful administrations for some time without much decentralisation.

There is some confusion on what subsidarity means. It should mean devolution to the most effective level, which isn't always the same as the lowest possible level. The Radcliffe Maud report suggested that the county borough was the optimum unit; it was probably close to the mark. The power to hire and fire may seem like a good idea but it is not as easy as it appears. Short circuiting official channels may seem like avoiding red tape but it may prove costly.

The problem of legal costs may make it harder for small bodies with limited resources to act. However, there are areas where neighbourhood councils could have a useful input, not in meddling in service provision but on environmental matters.

Two areas stand out, non-strategic planning and parking policy. Here, people could exercise some control over their environment.

As an incentive, neighbourhood councils could be given any revenue raised from parking charges to spend on projects in their neighbourhood. They could also exercise some control over parking attendants instead of relying on private contractors with performance-related bonuses that encourage the issuing of tickets (including in some cases tickets issued before the time has expired).

If we are to have neighbourhood councils, they should be directly elected, as in the case of town councils in rural areas, and hopefully there will be no cabinets and career politicians. Who knows, it may even restore the incentive to vote.

Andrew Hudson is a member of the Association of Liberal Democrat Trade Unionists

REVIEWS

Liberals and Cannibals The Implications of Diversity by Steven Lukes Verso 2003 £16

Robert Frost once suggested that a liberal is someone who cannot take his own side in a debate. To what extent should liberals tolerate diversity and when should they take a moral stand? The current controversy about 'multiculturalism' makes this book a timely contribution to the debate about cultural and moral diversity.

The book's title refers to the ultimate absurdity of relativism, the double bind of ethnocentric universalism, "liberalism for the liberals, cannibalism for the cannibals." The fact that we would not tolerate cannibalism, even among people for whom it was an authentic tradition, suggests that all but the most diehard relativist must draw the line somewhere.

Given the extent of travel, migration and international trade, we are daily confronted not only by the differences within cultures but also by the differences between cultures. Is pluralism always the appropriate response?

This collection of essays supplies no easy answers, but helps us understand how the tension in politics between relativism and moral universalism can be resolved within the framework of liberalism.

Simon Titley

Scouting for Boys by Robert Baden-Powell Oxford University Press 2004 £12.99

Originally published in 1908, Baden-Powell's handbook and philosophy for teenage boys launched the Boy Scout movement and the world has never been the same since.

This new edition is notable for restoring two previously censored pages of warnings about the dangers of self-abuse ("A very large number of the lunatics in our asylums have made themselves ill by indulging in this vice although at one time they were sensible cheery boys like you.").

But is this handbook any use for the teenagers of today? These two quotes should leave us in no doubt: "You can tell a man's character from the way he wears his hat. The way a man (or a woman) walks is often a good guide. I was once accused of mistrusting men with waxed moustaches. Well so, to a certain extent, I do. It often means vanity and sometimes drink." And "Every boy ought to learn to shoot and to obey orders, else he is no more good when war breaks out than an old woman, and merely gets killed like a squealing rabbit."

It's easy to mock, particularly when it comes to B-P's imperialist sentiments, and the overtly military and religious aspects of the scout movement may leave many Liberals feeling queasy. Yet I can't help feeling that anything that keeps teenagers off the streets and instils a sense of civic duty is no bad thing.

Simon Titley

This is Craig Brown by Craig Brown Ebury Press 2004 £7.99

Craig Brown is Britain's finest literary parodist. You have almost certainly read him, even if you did not realise he was the true author. Brown's work includes the Diaries in Private Eye, and columnists Wallace Arnold and Bel Littlejohn. This book is a compilation of his best pieces.

It would be a mistake to see Brown's parodies as nothing more than the literary equivalent of Alistair McGowan. He gets right to the heart of his targets by revealing how their particular choice of words betrays the weaknesses of their personalities.

So, for example, we have his Private Eye diary by the Queen, which demonstrates Her Majesty's essential banality; a marvellous pair of speeches by Tony Blair, which skewer the PM's slogan-ridden vacuity; and (lest we forget) a version of Paddy Ashdown's diaries, where Brown captures precisely the mix of pomposity and frustration.

Besides the parodies, readers are also treated to some of Brown's literary criticism. A particular joy is his tongue-in-cheek textual analysis of Harold Pinter's obsessive use of the word 'shit', which had me laughing out loud.

Satire of this quality is rivalled currently only by the 'Two Johns' (Bird and Fortune). A work of genius, and also a form of literary immunization against having the wool pulled over your eyes by politicians and celebrities.

Simon Titley

A Death in Brazil by Peter Robb Bloomsbury 2003 £16.99

Death is common in Brazil. Sometimes it's violent, sometimes not – but painful nonetheless. Over ten years ago one of my closest school friends lost his father through a painful illness. It was tragic; he was still young, being still in his forties.

He and his family had recently moved back to Brazil when he died. It was an interesting time, not least because changes in the family meant there were new relations. And one of these was a man around his age called Fernando Collor.

Collor appeared to have it all: he was a former mayor of the capital of Alagoas state, Maceio; he was rich and good-looking. And he wanted to be president. In 1989 he convinced the political right and the mass media to support him and he romped home, becoming Brazil's first directly elected president after the end of the military dictatorship.

Within three years he was out of office and stripped of his political rights for eight years, impeached by Congress for being criminally corrupt. He had been receiving illicit funds through his campaign manager, the shady PC Farias, who had set up numerous false bank accounts and companies.

Collor went into self-imposed exile in Miami while PC disappeared to avoid arrest. Eventually the law caught up with him. PC was tried and convicted of tax evasion. But less than a year later he was out, on parole. Then one day in June 1996 he was found dead in bed. He had been shot, supposedly by an embittered girlfriend. But few believe this, with several other suspects all having motives to want PC kept quiet.

So Peter Robb recounts the rapid rise and fall of two of recent Brazilian history's most ignominious characters. But his account of Brazil begins on an earlier, more personal event: his own close brush with death at the hands of a would-be murderer in his Rio apartment.

Realising his discomfort, Robb travels north to the city of Recife. There he throws himself with gusto into the Bangue restaurant where he samples everything on the menu and makes friends with its proprietor, the reserved Vava.

But just as Vava remains ultimately unknowable, Robb is also frustratingly distant. For despite the opening of the book, this isn't a memoir of the author's time in Brazil. Although there are some personal observations and accounts they form a small part of this odd, but enjoyable half-biography, textbook and cultural and literary reader of Brazil. For Robb's interest is less in him and the people close to him than in the country as a whole, from the first contact between Pedro Cabral and the indigenous people in 1500 to the left-wing Workers Party victory in the 2002 presidential elections.

Throughout his book, Robb points out examples of Brazil's hugely unjust society, in which those at the top have everything – power, money and influence – and those at the bottom of the pile are maltreated and abused. From the runaway slaves who set up their own city of Palmares in the seventeenth century to the downtrodden and destitute who flocked to the messianic Antonio Conselheiro's community at Canudos in Bahia in the 1890s, or the occupations of fertile but neglected land by landless peasants today, Brazil's past and present has been one where the authorities come down hard on those which resist. The slaves at Palmares were captured and executed, Canudos was razed to the ground; and in April 1996 military police massacred demonstrating but unarmed peasants.

This is a country where the races are mixed, but where being white dominates. The Portugal of the sixteenth century had one million inhabitants, less than a third of England. To control their new lands, they would have to turn a blind eye to racial purity, procreating first with the indigenous people and later with the black African slaves who were forced to work on the sugar plantations. But still power laid with the white landlord Portuguese elite, who held the power of life and death, and Brazil's coloured people aspired to join their ranks.

But while the marginalised want to be like the privileged, so do Brazil's elites dream of being European. Nothing better exemplifies this than Robb's observation of bacalhau, or salted cod, as a luxury food. With thousands of miles of coastline and plenty of fresh fish to be caught, why should a fish which lives in the North Sea be preserved and shipped at enormous cost halfway around the world? Ultimately, the reason is simple: only those with wealth can afford it, giving the consumer social status.

But even with such a past and present, mentality and attitude, Robb sees hope for Brazil. While searching for clues to PC's murder in Maceio, he comes across a copy of Raymundo Faoro's 1950s book, Os Donos de Poder (Owners of Power). Faoro traces the origins of Brazil's gross inequality and concentration of power in the hands of a few; but where his analysis falters is in explaining how Collor came to be impeached. It wasn't Congress which initiated it, but rather the voice of public anger on the street.

That, and the victory of the Workers Party in the 2002 presidential election, bodes well for the country. Dealing with Collor's corruption was one hurdle the young democracy had to overcome; the peaceful transition of power from those conservatives who have always held it to the left-wing opposition marks another step in that consolidation.

Two years before Collor popped up again in Brazil. His ban now ended, he wanted to be mayor of Sao Paulo. Given the corruption and incompetence of the previous incumbent, perhaps he thought he just might get away with it. But voters had long memories and he finished a long way short of the eventual winner, a member of Lula's party.

When such things occur, then it's possible to believe that maybe Robb's optimism in Brazil's future isn't so misguided.

Guy Burton

Vodka with Chocolate Chasers by Dan Trelfer Lollipop Media 2002 £5.99

I don't know about you, but I've never taken the Trans-Siberian railway. Nor, come to think of it, have I had vodka with chocolate chasers either. But that's not really the point of this first novel by Dan Trelfer. Rather it's about how seven people, thrown together by chance, while away the hours during the six day journey from Beijing to Moscow.

As a first effort, it's quite good, even if some inconsistencies in the narrative crop up here and there.

Anyone who has backpacked will recognise many of the characters in the novel – especially the enigmatic and mysterious traveller, Damon, who keeps to himself and the intensely gauche Neil, with his irritating cheetah laugh.

Although written from the viewpoint of Edson and his companion Louis, the novel is clearly autobiographical and recounts several journeys made by the author (I also have a nagging suspicion the long-winded explanation for Damon's four-year exile to escape his job as a runner also mirrors Trelfer's own life) and his school friend who provides the character for Louis. The awful Neil, meanwhile, who insists on commenting about his stool movements, is not a single identifiable person but rather an amalgamation of the most annoying people you meet when travelling.

In this Trelfer's great strength is to bring to life his characters. What follows after Edson and Louis board the train is an endless round of drinking (including a night spent drinking Black Death Vodka and knocking back chocolate with their Russian cabin-mates) and stories as they and their companions talk about their worst experiences on the road. Along the way they compete with one another by showing off their worldliness through a series of tales, from escaping Indian jewel smugglers to irate Kenyan buffalo. And it is in the dialogue that Trelfer is at his best – although some of it could have been tightened up here and there.

But the colour Trelfer adds to his characters remains uneven. Neil is a character who anyone who has been in a hostel in Eastern Europe, a bus in China or a train in Siberia will recognise. But by painting him so

vividly, his long-suffering cabin-mate, James, pales by comparison. Similarly, Edson's interest in one of the two Danish girls is self-evident, but with the exception of one brief insight, they remain a canvas on which the others' impressions are projected.

Yet this may well be understandable. The nature of backpacking – especially when you're in your early twenties – is an extremely narcissistic activity. Much of your time is spent 'collecting' experiences, not so much for their immediacy, as to be able to compete better with your peers at a later date. Similarly, a lot of discussion in the dialogues between the characters revolves around their desire to 'experience' the 'real' China, India or other parts of the world; but James's desire for a McDonald's after six days of authentic (by the standards of the train) Russian food seems to indicate they don't want it to be too 'real'.

Maybe that's unfair, not least because at that age you know little better. Being in your early twenties is probably the only time one can get away with having a myopic worldview. And yet there is something vaguely alluring throughout Trelfer's novel. For those of you who, like me, have done the same as these characters at some point in your teenage or student days – shouldering a rucksack, going out the door and slumming it in foreign parts for a few weeks or months – will discover a certain sense of nostalgia. It's the knowledge those times of youthful irresponsibility have gone; now we can only write about it.

But even if the intervening tales and behaviour of Edson, Louis, Neil and James appear flippant, Trelfer has done a good job of exploding their world. For somewhere, in the vast wastes of Siberia, an event occurs which makes them readjust the way they view the world. Or at least I'd like to think so.

I don't know if Dan Trelfer has made any headway on his next project, a biography of the former QPR player Bill Williams, who is credited with discovering the former Liverpool goalkeeper, Bruce Grobelaar. But I hope we won't have to wait for too long. Until then if you want more tales of his readers' one-upmanship of their tales involving vodka-fuelled jinks, you'll have to visit his website, Shambolic Operations Dot Com.

Guy Burton

Social Democratic Trade Unionism by Robert Taylor Catalyst 2003 £5"

Professor Taylor is chair of the Liberal Democrats' Employment and Trade Unions Working Group.

He begins with an analysis of the current situation and is highly critical of New Labour's approach to trade unions in their desire to appeal to business, warning that it could result in their turning away from

modernisation and towards militancy as shown by the 'awkward squad'.

He is critical of a paper at a Progressive Governance conference that concentrated on the citizen consumer rather than the worker citizen. He explains that, contrary to their image, trade unions have changed with demarcation disputes being virtually non-existent and the tabloid image of unions being incorrect.

Contrary to popular opinion, Taylor explains, industrial relations were not characterized by endless disputes even in the old days. The work force has not changed as much as has been suggested, with the majority of employees still being in full-time permanent jobs with prospects, and the length of job tenure is now greater than eight years ago.

Companies are no longer contracting out core activities and some are actually bringing contracted out ones back in house. And although unions may not be as strong as they once were, they are by no means as ineffectual as the unions in the United States are. However, there has been a deterioration in the quality of working life, particularly for part time workers and people over 50.

The author advocates a new workplace programme. Whilst advocating partnership, he recognises that independent trade unions are not an arm of the personnel department, there to enforce company policy or merely act as insurance companies.

Unions can, however, help to encourage corporate social responsibility, including the ethical labelling of products. He argues that the experience from Europe regarding regulations is that they are not in themselves an unnecessary cost of business.

Taylor wants to see an effective trade union movement and he calls for a role beyond the workplace for unions in developing IT and networking. On policy matters, he supports a stronger role in the ETUC and in the wider world through lobbying with NGOs for international global regulations, and the supervision of core labour standards with more input into the International Labour Organisation.

He wants to see trade unions brought back into mainstream political life, which he regards as common sense, and calls for a new industrial relations settlement between the government and TUC, including extending rights at work, the period during which strikers taking lawful industrial action are protected from dismissal, rights for agency and short-term workers, and the legalisation of solidarity action across state boundaries.

However, there are a few strings attached, such as funds for trade unions on condition that they carry out modernisation programs and a new deal for public service workers. But conditionality means both may conflict with the ILO conventions that the author rightly endorses.

On the whole, the pamphlet is positive and takes a strong pro-union line, although there is an element of wishful thinking as found in the author's counterfactual "if Harold Wilson had agreed In Place of Strife" which he contributed to the book 'Prime Minister Portillo and other things that never happened'.

It will be interesting to see how much of the Catalyst paper is found in the party's final policy paper, as it could greatly enhance the party's chances of securing the allegiance of ordinary trade unionists as opposed to the TUC establishment, if it drops the wishful thinking elements.

However, people reading the pamphlet and the consultative paper may be forgiven for asking the real Professor Taylor to stand up.

Andrew Hudson

Ronald Searle - A Biography by Russell Davies Chris Beetles 2003 £20.00

Ronald Searle is one of the definitive British cartoonists of the second half of the last century. One could echo Hans Pflug of the Swiss magazine Graphis, who said that Searle 'has never been regarded as subversive or seditious' by the British, despite the evident cruelty in his work. Or Time magazine's cry of 'whimsy' which they then went on to justify as a curse of British humour before urging their readers to dig deep. The essence of what Pflug said was that the British know how to laugh at themselves, and Searle's pen provokes this better than many, even in its darkest moments.

Searle has never been an overtly political cartoonist. As a child, I loved the off-shoot St.Trinian's films, and discovered Molesworth. Despite the changed social milieu, Back In The Jug Agane still holds its own (consider the success of Harry Potter), I never tire of the beak's assertion that Proust did not exist (be this Willans rather than Searle). However, as a social commentator few can beat him and, as the author reminds us, he was way ahead of his time in discovering the green agenda.

Lots of Searle's cartoons (fewer than you'd like, especially when the text refers to one that isn't to hand) aside, this book is a wonderful source of anecdote. We find Cle Freud as driver of the 'stolen vehicle' for a raid on Foyles involving Hermione Gingold promoting The Terror of St.Trinian's. Searle's role in the Suez crisis… bizarre…

First published in 1990, Russell Davies and Ronald Searle have made some corrections and updated the bibliography and exhibition list in this edition, which is available from Chris Beetles Ltd, 8-10 Ryder Street, London SW1Y 6QB (020 7839 7551). Chris can probably flog a few original Searles to you while you're there.

Stewart Rayment

Lord Bonkers' Diary

Monday

Patricia Hewitt, that excellent newspaper the High Leicestershire Radical informs me, is to offer tax relief to people employing Nannies. I find this bitterly ironic, for it was my vigorous advocacy of a punitive tax on Nannies that first won me the chairmanship of Rutland Young Liberals and thus launched me on my long career of public service. What dreadful creatures they were! Always insisting that a chap ate up his semolina or undid his laces before taking off his boots, and That Was Not The Half Of It. I got through rather a lot of Nannies, as it happens, but I do recall one particularly gruesome member of the crew. Clad in my sailor suit, I had stolen away from her one afternoon to sail my model yacht and was having the jolliest of times. When finally she recaptured me, I was threatened with the most dreadful reprisals, and she refused to let me fetch the boat, which happened to have run aground in the shallows. Insisting on retrieving it herself, she hitched up her skirts and waded into the water, whereupon she was eaten by the Rutland Water Monster. We have remained the firmest of friends to this day.

Tuesday

I do not think I have got this Iraq business quite straight. We were told that the noble Iraqis were labouring under the heavy yoke of Saddam Hussein's tyranny and that when we set them free all would be sweetness, light, site-value rating and so forth. Yet a year after this liberation, we are still shooting people. I ask a military acquaintance what is going on and am told that the chaps at whom we are letting fly are "loyal to Moqtada al-Sadr"; to which I reply: "I hope they have a nice day for it." When one arrives in a place one does not normally visit one is very liable to encounter strange people. For instance, when I go to Melton Mowbray these days I see the oddest characters walking about, but I feel no compulsion to shoot them. I find, generally speaking, that if one is disconcerted at meeting people who disagree with one it is better to stay at home.

Wednesday

To the tepee by the Thames for a chat with my old friend Rising Star, the Red Indian brave and member for Winchester. I find him clad from head to toe in a chemical protection suit, albeit that it is set off with his habitual magnificent feathered headdress. Consequently, I find it difficult to make out what he is saying beyond the occasional "Heap" or "Um". As far as I can tell, he is complaining about the security at the Palace of Westminster and is particularly cutting about people wearing fancy dress. I am forced to reply that I find this a little rich coming from him. Indeed, so angry am I that I open the Westminster internal telephone directory, ring the most magnificently named official I can find and invite him to dinner tomorrow. I shall enjoy meeting the Mousefinder Pursuivant.

Thursday

Imagine my pleasure when the Mousefinder Pursuivant turns out to be none other than my old friend Whittington. Over lunch – I have the Brown Windsor soup followed by the Beef Wellington; he has the whitebait followed by the whitebait – he tells me that he offered to act as the Reverend Hughes' cat for the duration of the Mayoral campaign, but was informed by one of the bright young types in charge of it that "Real animals are like so twentieth century". Whittington tells me that he replied "Whatever" and took alternative employment here at Westminster. Meanwhile, the Hughes Campaign has spent a small fortune on something called a "Virtual Cat".

Friday

I travel home to Rutland after these few days in Town on business. I telegraph ahead making it clear that I want no fuss on my arrival; consequently, I arrive at Bonkers Halt to be met only by a band playing "Hail the Conquering Hero" and a delegation of villagers anxious to present me with an illuminated address. After the formalities have been completed and I have made a gracious speech of acceptance, I return to the Hall. How fine it looks with its spreading wisteria ("The walls be wisterical," as Meadowcroft proudly informs me) and its smulianed windows! I am pleased to hear that the tickets for the raffle to fund repairs to the roof of St Asquith's are selling well. I have donated front seats in the Commons public gallery as the first prize, and we have sold a gratifyingly large number of tickets to a gentleman from Tora Bora.

Saturday

For years, as many of my readers will be aware, Lembit Öpik has maintained a lonely vigil at Conference, sitting among the chimneypots wearing an upturned colander and armed with an old tennis racket. For hour after hour, while those of us inside innocently enjoy a riveting speech from Nigel Jones or, as it may be, a particularly juicy constitutional amendment moved by Malachy Dromgoogle, he scans the skies for rogue meteorites. Occasionally I offer to take a turn, but Öpik is not one to desert his post. Now, he breathlessly informs me, he has become engaged to a woman who shares his taste for watching the heavens. She is, it transpires, the jolly weather girl who was on that programme where everyone sat around in the jungle eating insects. Enjoyable as it was, I was a little disappointed to see Philip Tufnell taking part; for I do not imagine that orthodox left-arm spinners from earlier generations would have conducted themselves in this way. You would not, I feel sure, have caught Derek Underwood or Wilfred Rhodes tucking into a plate of beetles for the enjoyment of the public.

Sunday

My guest at dinner this evening is none other than my old friend the Liberal Democrat education expert Phil Willis. He is the MP for Harrogate, where they make that delicious toffee. In his honour I have the table in the Blue Dining Room laid with the finest china, which at the Hall means that made by the short-lived Oakham factory. This excellent concern produced plates to a novel design whereby they were equipped with two distinct levels. The idea was that one would have one's main course on the top and one's pudding, as it were, downstairs. I ask Willis if he does not think this a very clever idea, but he replies that he is against it because it involves a two-tier service.

Lord Bonkers, who was Liberal MP for Rutland South-West 1906-10, opened his diary to Jonathan Calder.

www.bonkers.hall.btinternet.co.uk