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COMMENTARY

NO CASE FOR DELUSION

This May's general election produced a middling result for the Liberal Democrats. There was neither a collapse nor a breakthrough. Inevitably, such an outcome is open to interpretation. We should not allow interpretation to turn into delusion.

The historical significance of this election is not dramatic gains or losses, but that it marks the cusp of a transformation in the party's image (and self-image) from being a party mainly challenging the Tories in rural areas to one mainly challenging Labour in urban areas.

Of greater significance than the dozen gains from Labour are the many more Labour seats where the Lib Dems have moved into a strong second place. This is a promising basis for the next general election.

This trend was both predicted and explained by Michael Steed (Liberator 301). It will be interesting to see how it plays out in the party's internal politics.

Some Lib Dem right-wingers do not seem to have got the drift. In an obvious attempt to frame the post-election debate, they were busy spinning the line – both before and after polling day – that the party's handicap is that it is "too left wing". This is the first big delusion.

Let's leave aside for the moment the fact that the traditional linear left-right model does not do Liberalism justice.

Judged on tax and spend criteria, there was little to choose between the main parties in this election. Labour was defending a public expenditure annual budget of £519 billion. The Tories were proposing to cut this by just £4 billion (less than 1%). The Lib Dems proposed an increase of only £6 billion (slightly over 1%). In terms of overall government expenditure, such differences are negligible.

To the extent that the Liberal Democrats can now be described as being to the 'left' of Labour, this is entirely a reflection of New Labour's shift to the right. In any case, Liberals are less concerned with the dogmatic private vs. public argument than they are with the libertarian vs. authoritarian divide. In this, they are in agreement with much of the electorate.

Opinion polls indicate that most of the public wish to see no dramatic increase or cut in public expenditure but are more concerned with the quality of what they get for their money. What is more striking is that the issues about which people are most strongly divided are moral issues on the libertarian-authoritarian axis. As long as the Lib Dems have the courage of their convictions, this divide provides the party with distinctive territory to stake out.

The second big delusion is the belief that the Liberal Democrats' biggest problem is its own members. This was apparent in the claim made by Charles Kennedy, that the party's 'embarrassing' policies were the products of ambushes in the conference hall by small groups of activists.

As we explain in more detail in RB (see p.4), the Lib Dem policies stigmatised by opponents were in almost every case contained in policy papers, drafted by working groups, approved by the party's Federal Policy Committee (chaired by Kennedy) and only rubber-stamped by the conference.

The fact that such false claims are being made suggests opinion is being softened-up before an attempt to abolish the party conference, or at least neuter what little influence the membership has over policy-making.

As both David Boyle and Jeremy Hargreaves argue in this issue, there is a real need to involve the membership more not less, to reconnect the party's policy-making to popular concerns and practical experience.

The Lib Dems also have to learn that they are playing in the big league now, and must prepare the case for their policies (and rebuttals of their opponents' attacks) more thoroughly than they did this time.

A further delusion is the notion that the Tories did well in this election and the ensuing assumption that the Lib Dems must defer to Tory policy. So here's a reality check:

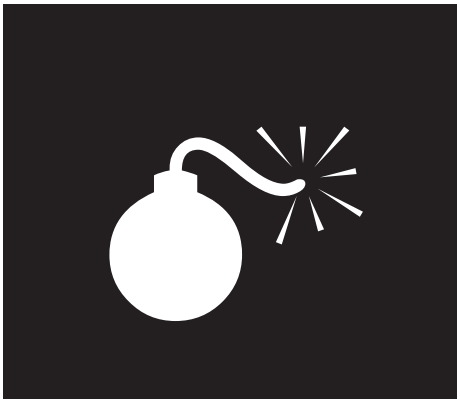
The main opposition party, facing an unpopular government and an even more unpopular prime minister, achieved an increase of only 0.5% in its vote. It won fewer seats than Michael Foot's Labour Party managed at its nadir in 1983. It enabled Labour to achieve a bigger majority than that won by Mrs Thatcher in 1979. And it actually suffered a nationwide swing of 1% to the Lib Dems.

The Tory election strategy was to solidify its core vote while depressing the turnout of Labour voters. The Tories demonstrated that they retain a hardcore vote of around 30%, motivated primarily by a hatred of outsiders. But they also retain an ability to repel almost everyone else.

The Tories are in a real bind. Modernise (i.e. become more socially liberal) and alienate much of their membership and core vote, opening up a space for UKIP and the BNP. Stick with their present line, and be forever doomed to represent a declining minority of bigots.

Leading right-wingers in the Liberal Democrats who say the party must "sound more like the Tories" are now looking very silly indeed. New Labour's increasingly unpopular centralisation and control-freakery is no reason for the Liberal Democrats to sound more like Labour, either.

The answer is the bleedin' obvious – to sound more like Liberals.



RADICAL BULLETIN

FROM STREETS TO HALLS

Barely had the election ended before Lib Dem leader Charles Kennedy decided to play the old game of 'blame the activists' for controversial policies that he felt embarrassed the party.

"We must reconsider whether it should be possible to commit the party to specific and often controversial policies on the basis of a brief, desultory debate in a largely empty hall," he said.

The implication of this is that people who bother to go to otherwise 'empty' debates are able to stage policy ambushes.

The reality is quite different. Let's see where some of the 'embarrassing' Lib Dem policies highlighted by opponents actually came from.

'Soft on drugs' was from a policy paper, mulled over at endless length by a working group, approved by the Federal Party Committee (chair, Charles Kennedy) and only then presented to conference for debate, desultory or otherwise.

'Giving prisoners the vote' also emerged from a policy paper under the same process.

'Allowing 16-year-olds to buy pornography' is not in itself a policy but is implicit in the party's policy of lowering the age of majority to 16. It would be rather incongruous if people were allowed to vote but not to purchase the same material as any other voter. This policy also came from an approved policy paper.

The variety of policies that both the Tories and Labour tried to bundle together as 'soft on crime' also came from policy papers that must have passed the FPC without its chair noticing.

The sole exception on the list, banning four-wheel drive vehicles, is not party policy at all but was the personal initiative of the then environment spokesman Norman Baker.

If the party had operated a rapid rebuttal unit, some of these issues might have been dealt with during the campaign.

However, responsibility for 'embarrassing' policies does not, more is the pity, rest with conference at all, as Kennedy of all people ought to know.

It is time for a brief history lesson. The present policy process was designed not to meet the needs of the Lib Dems in the 2000s but to deal with what happened in the Labour Party nearly 30 years ago.

The founders of the SDP, having seen Labour's internal processes, were so paranoid about their activists that they produced a top-down policy process controlled almost wholly by panels of self-described experts.

The spinelessness of most Liberal merger negotiators in 1987/88 meant this process was imported wholesale into the Lib Dems.

Thus power over policy might lie nominally with conference, but in practice rests with the policy working groups, none of whose papers have ever been rejected by the conference.

Membership of these groups is by self-nomination and at the choice of the FPC, with the result that they are stuffed full of professionals with axes to grind and have minimal input from practical politicians.

Whether the policies attacked during the campaign were good, bad or indifferent is not the point – they were made by conference in name alone and the real fault lies with the policy working group process, which had no louder defender than Kennedy during the merger.

Kennedy might also pause to think of the damage he could do by disparaging the legitimacy of his party's machinery.

The then chief whip David Alton's baseless lie about people "walking in off the streets" to vote in the Eastbourne defence debate in 1986 (Liberator 166) did lasting damage to the party's credibility (and indeed, to Alton's). It also assumed the status of fact in the media, to the extent that no-one could later undo the damage. Surely Kennedy does not want the words 'desultory' and 'empty' hung round his party's policies?

WINNERS AND LOSERS

The first stage in revising Lib Dem policy for this parliament is the policy review instituted by leader Charles Kennedy, though it remains unclear whether the review body will be able to change policy itself or merely recommend areas that should be examined.

Top of the list, according to Kennedy, is taxation. Indeed, his post-election statement noted: "No area of policy will be more crucial over the course of this Parliament than taxation and that is why we have already announced a major review of our tax policy.

"Our country is going through a period of social and economic change. All too often politicians are fighting yesterday's battles on the basis of an outdated view of how society operates. I shall look in particular to some of our newer and younger Parliamentary colleagues to ensure that we do not fall into that trap."

This begs a host of questions. Which 'newer and younger' colleagues, for start, and will they be chosen on the basis of age (which would be merely odd) or on the basis of being economic right wingers like David Laws (which would be deplorable).

What is the 'outdated view' referred to? The party's main, indeed very nearly only, high profile tax policy was to raise income tax for those who earn more than £100,000 a year, which proved hugely popular with all but the handful of the population who receive this sort of money.

However, since there is a high correlation between possessing personal wealth and holding economic liberal views, is this policy in the firing line?

The other tax controversy was over local income tax, which has been blamed by former Guildford MP Sue Doughty for the loss of her seat. Two reasons to be cautious over this assessment are that she very nearly held on anyway in a year she was likely to lose given her slim majority in 2001, and that the party easily held similar seats.

Also, a group of helpers who went to Guildford from south-west London, just before the election, returned horrified at the disorganisation they beheld. Perhaps LIT was not all that was to blame.

Local income tax has also incurred hostility from Liberal Future's Charles Anglin. It is a mystery why the party has started to promote this unrepresentative right-winger as a media spokesman.

According to Anglin: "What [middle class voters] heard was that we were coming after their wallets and I think that made them think twice about voting for us – and in some cases, it pushed them into the arms of the Conservatives."

Given that any tax change will create winners and losers, and therefore go for somebody's wallet, can we take it that Anglin wishes either to go for poor people's wallets instead, or to reduce the amount of money available to local government? The latter might excite some comment in ALDC's ranks.

MORE TAXIS NEEDED

One little remarked feature of the new Lib Dem parliamentary party is that it is very unusual size.

In modern times, British parliamentary politics had comprised two large parties and a number of minnows.

When all the Liberal MPs could fit in a taxi, it was sensible for them to decide their business collectively in weekly meetings. This system indeed served perfectly well until 1997, when only 20 or so MPs had to be accommodated.

Since then, it has worked less well, with important business being kept from the open parliamentary party meeting in case those present take the 'wrong' decision.

While too big at 62 to continue as before, the parliamentary party is not big enough to adopt the Labour or Tory model of everything being decided by the shadow cabinet.

Sorting this out while avoiding disgruntled backbenchers who feel excluded will be an early problem for the MPs.

TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING?

One of the most delicate problems facing the Lib Dem candidates committee is what to do about constituencies where allegations are raised that large numbers of people have suddenly joined the party and appear to have done so to support a particular applicant as PPC.

Whatever the truth of these allegations, and it must be stressed that none have been proven, there is concern about the possibility of aspiring candidates signing up large numbers of people from particular districts, local organisations, religions, ethnicities or other common interests who appear to know little or nothing of the party and its policies.

Two ideas understood to be under examination are a ban on signing up new members in any constituency when it becomes known that a by-election is due, and a requirement that one cannot vote in a candidate selection without having been a member for a year.

These ideas may be sledgehammers to crack nuts, but it appears Cowley Street is determined to do something.

ME OLD CHINA

Liberal International's congress in Sofia in May got off to a rather uncomfortable start with a row over the status of the Taiwanese delegation, which the conference's Bulgarian hosts did not wish to admit to their country.

Bulgaria is ruled by a coalition of two LI members, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (the party of the Turkish minority), which is a long-standing member, and the National Movement of Simeon II, which became a full member at the congress.

The latter is an unusual political beast in that Simeon Saxe Coburg is the pretender to the Bulgarian throne, though he has formally dropped his claim and is now prime minister of the republic.

Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party is among LI's largest, wealthiest and most important members, as it runs its country's government.

However, Taiwanese politicians cannot easily travel because foreign governments do not wish to offend Beijing, and so refuse to admit them.

It was always known that senior government members would not be able to attend LI, but then even relatively junior DPP members were barred including an LI staff member.

It was made clear that it was unacceptable to prevent delegates from attending a congress and a compromise reached.

Beijing appears to be tracking LI events and trying to bully host nations in an effort to make mischief against the DPP.

SILENCE IS GOLDEN

One of the Lib Dems' finer hours was the last ditch battle over the government's anti-terrorism legislation just before the general election.

Imagine for a moment, readers, that you have been elevated and clad in ermine. If summoned to an impromptu group meeting at midnight to be told there is another vote at 5am, would you: (a) listen patiently to the leader and the chief whip explaining what is going to happen and figure out where you can get your head down for a few hours kip; or (b) discover you are Lord Philips of Sudbury, and choose that particular moment to start questioning the entire strategy, which the front benches in both houses have been pursuing for the preceding few weeks?

Lord Philips was not the only lord visited by an inappropriate urge to speak. Lord Watson of Richmond decided that 4.45am was a suitable time to lecture Charles Kennedy and the assembled peers at great length on his opinion of the matter.

SO YOU WANT TO REVIEW POLICY?

Charles Kennedy plans to conduct a post-election policy review. Simon Titley offers this step-by-step guide

Just after polling day, Charles Kennedy announced he would be conducting a review of party policy. Not just any review, but a "massive policy overhaul".

This was not a sudden response to the election result, since the review was originally announced in January. The Times (31 January) reported that Kennedy "wants bold environmental policies, more progressive tax plans to help the low-paid and a fresh look at the party's position on Europe and the euro. Some long-held Lib Dem policies may be abandoned, such as commitment to regional government, after the North East overwhelmingly rejected a regional assembly." The report added, "Mr Kennedy wants to speed up his party's policy-making process, which is felt to be too inflexible when plans need updating."

Compare these aspirations with what Kennedy has said more recently. The goalposts are moving and it is not clear precisely what the policy review is now meant to achieve.

So you want to review party policy? Here is Liberator's handy cut-out-and-keep guide.

1. Before you can know the answer, you must find the question.

Charles Kennedy risks coming up with the answer "forty-two". He has stated some positive and justifiable objectives – to make the most of the new parliament and to be prepared for the next election. He has also expressed dissatisfaction with the current system of policy-making (albeit based on a false claim – see 3 below).

However, his review appears to be based on the premise that policy was the main problem in this election. Is this a valid assumption? For example, to what extent were the problems with local income tax intrinsic to that policy or was it more the case that this policy was not rehearsed, promoted or defended competently?

"My aim as leader of the Liberal Democrats is to put the party in a position to challenge for power at the next election," says Kennedy. By focusing exclusively on the detail of policy, is there not a danger that other important factors may be neglected?

More important than policy detail is the moral core that should underpin party policy, and the passion with which it is expressed. More important too is the party's ability to relate its policies to real concerns, chief of which is the deep sense of insecurity and powerlessness that informs most people's attitudes to political issues.

And what are the powers of this policy review? Will it change policy or merely recommend changes? Will it take a strategic overview or get bogged down in the production of a laundry list of policies? Will it stimulate debate or attempt to pre-empt it?

With no clear terms of reference other than a vague idea that party policy is not quite right, the omens are not good.

2. Wood, not trees

In Charles Kennedy's press announcement, he promised to "look at every single policy" Is he serious? Has he any idea how many there are? Most conference delegates haven't the time or the inclination to plough through every policy paper, so it's doubtful the leader has.

The risk is of being unable to see the wood for the trees. The work of the policy review would be accomplished quicker – and would have more impact – if it focused simply on establishing a moral core, a target audience and a few key themes. The details would then fall into place.

3. Cut the crap

When Charles Kennedy briefs the Guardian to blame "embarrassing policies introduced by grassroots activists"; when he tells the Glasgow Herald that he "would introduce moves to stop radical factions from embarrassing the party"; and when he stigmatises the party conference as committing the party to "specific and controversial policies on the basis of a brief, desultory debate in a largely empty hall," he is in greater danger of deluding himself than anyone else.

If Kennedy thinks party policy is a liability, it is his own fault. In almost every case, the policies ridiculed by the Lib Dems' opponents during the election were drawn from policy papers, written by working groups and approved by the Federal Policy Committee (chaired by Kennedy).

So why tell lies and blame the conference when none of 'embarrassing policies' originated on the conference floor? The only possible reason for this dishonest spinning can be to soften up opinion in preparation for an attack on the conference's already limited powers. It is both a shabby trick and a distraction from more important tasks.

If existing party policy really is a liability, and given that working groups and the FPC are responsible for generating it, attacking the conference will leave the source of the problem untouched.

4. Don't re-invent the wheel.

Following the publication of Jeremy Hargreaves's booklet *Wasted Rainforests*, both the Federal Conference Committee and the Federal Policy Committee discussed proposals for reform of the party's policy-making procedures, and changes are already being implemented (see Jeremy's article in this issue).

In addition, the FPC has set up a strategic exercise called *Meeting the Challenge*, which will consult at this autumn's conference and conclude at the 2006 autumn conference.

Since Charles Kennedy chairs the FPC, one assumes he is already aware of these initiatives. Why, then, does he say that his policy review will "overhaul the way policy is made," when a reform process (of which he presumably approves) is already underway?

5. Trust the members.

Charles Kennedy once belonged to the SDP, a party whose founding principle was paranoia (its founders having been badly bruised in the internecine warfare of the 1970s Labour Party, when regarding one's own members as swivel-eyed loons was second nature). What is Kennedy afraid of these days? He should learn to trust his members.

Thousands of them have been councillors. They've been responsible for greater amounts of public expenditure than Kennedy ever has. He should harness his members' experience and ideas instead of trying to freeze them out.

For too long, the party has focused on the mechanics of campaigning to the detriment of political thinking. If the Liberal Democrats are to become a government in waiting, they must first become the centre of debate and the place where big political ideas emerge. This won't happen if a few cronies at the centre try to stitch up everything in advance.

However, if this review does turn out to be a crude device for railroading unpopular right-wing policies through the party, the membership will gladly give Kennedy reasons to be frightened.

6. Fundamental means fundamental.

When announcing the policy review, Charles Kennedy called for "imaginative, innovative and bold" thinking. But just how fundamental is he prepared to be?

If he is serious, he should go back to basics. All he has to do is read the preamble of his party's constitution. It is as good a template as any for determining whether the party's policies are in line with its fundamental values.

If he wishes to be 'bold', he must confront some major crises that are heading our way, such as pensions, the house price bubble, consumer debt and global warming. There may also be a recession by the time of the next general election. Having bold policies mean confronting some powerful popular delusions and powerful vested interests. Local income tax will have been a picnic by comparison.

"Imaginative, innovative and bold" is necessary but don't imagine it will be easy or popular.

7. Don't panic.

When Charles Kennedy first announced the policy review back in January, among his goals was "more progressive tax plans to help the low-paid". Now, however, it is being suggested that the two policies the party proposed to achieve that goal, local income tax and a higher tax rate on those earning over £100,000, are a liability and may be scrapped.

Following the election, Kennedy said, "No area of policy will be more crucial over the course of this parliament than taxation and that is why we have already announced a major review of our tax policy."

Instead of dissolving into a moral panic about taxation, I wonder whether Kennedy read the MORI opinion poll published in the Observer on 8 May? Here, we learn that, when people were asked whether reducing taxes or reducing government spending is more important, 56% said public services should be extended even if it meant higher taxes, 23% believed things should stay as they are, only 15% wanted taxes cut even if that meant a reduction in public services, and 5% didn't know.

Hardly grounds for a collective loss of nerve, is it?

8. Clarify the public vs. private spheres.

Liberal Democrats need to sort out where they believe the public and private spheres begin and end. Note that word 'sphere' rather than 'sector'. It suits both conservatives and socialists to conflate these distinct concepts.

To say that something belongs in the public sphere means that it is a legitimate area of public concern and therefore of political decision-making – it does not necessarily imply a role for the state, as conservative opponents and socialist supporters of the public sector would both have you believe.

The boundaries have been shifting. Curiously, while the public sphere is retreating from areas such as public transport or manufacturing industry, it is extending into areas of our private lives, such as personal health, family life and ID cards.

The Lib Dems are in as much of a muddle over this as anyone else. They are simultaneously crusading against business regulation while seeking to ban smoking in public places.

A coherent policy review is not possible unless a clear view is adopted on this matter. Further, the review must recognise that Liberalism is not an economistic philosophy. Our primary concern is that people enjoy liberty and are free from oppression. The public and private sectors are both capable of offering freedom or oppression, and Liberals should judge them on their outcomes, not insist on a dogmatic preference for one or the other.

The policy review should not fall into the trap of agonising over whether to appeal more to Labour or Tory voters. Its first duty is to appeal to Liberal voters.

9. Show you mean it.

The biggest problem in the election campaign wasn't the detail of Liberal Democrat policy so much as a lack of nerve. It was the pervading air of timidity, reinforced by Charles Kennedy's failure to show any real passion or conviction.

Policy detail has less public impact than moral clarity. Dry reiterations of the party line are inappropriate when there is so much about which to feel angry. Passion allied to philosophical confidence should come through in our spokespeople's interviews and speeches.

That's why the policy review would do better to help establish a moral core instead of getting bogged down in the detail. The party won't be able to rely on Iraq to fill this emotional gap next time. The answer is not to be ashamed of our Liberalism but to declaim it proudly.

The Liberal Democrats can neither hope nor deserve to overcome popular cynicism about politics unless they make their values explicit.

Simon Titley is a member of the Liberator Collective.

CAMPAIGNERS AND WONKS

The Liberal Democrats must rebalance their campaigning and policy if they are to make further gains, says David Boyle

Like most Liberal Democrats, I suffer from at least two psychological flaws – a sense that I am somehow excluded from decision-making (even Paddy had that one) and a delusion that I am uniquely well suited to taking decisions about campaign messages.

By naming these, I am at least able to keep them at bay, but the second is hard to lock away entirely during a general election.

Even so, the Liberal Democrats happen to have a set of the most sophisticated campaigners in UK politics – as even Andrew Marr said at the outset of the recent election campaign – and they tend to get it right.

Yes, there were fumbles with figures and one teeth-grindingly embarrassing party political broadcast. But, although time after time I found myself despairing that we were or were not taking a certain line or angle, I had to admit that – actually – Lords Rennard, Razzall and Newby had judged it right.

There have always been whisperings about the Rennard style of campaigning – Matthew Parris even talked about the 'limits of Rennardism'. But the fact is that he delivers, and sometimes – like in Hornsey and Wood Green – dramatically so.

A family crisis meant that I had to watch the results arrive in the early hours of 6 May online from Spain. And as the triumphs arrived, and the few disasters, I started to wonder how we could again make inroads into the Conservative vote – as we will have to do next time. It occurred to me that we would have to re-open a very Auld Argument. The one between campaigners and policy wonks.

Cast your mind back, if you can, to the peculiarly disappointing general election of 1987. Remember the Two Davids, two battlebuses, and the insanity of having nuclear deterrence of all things at the heart of the Alliance campaign.

The difficulties of negotiating a common platform between the two Alliance parties – and sneaking what was so exhaustingly agreed past Dr Owen – meant that campaigning was fatally subsumed beneath the details of policy.

It was in this period that David Penhaligon coined his famous putdown: if you've got something to say, put it in a leaflet and stick it through a letterbox.

For all of us who survived the disappointment of 1987, there was a strong if unspoken sense of Never Again.

Since then, and as a direct result, the campaigners have taken control of the party, with dramatic results on our electoral prospects, and the policy wonks have been cast into the top floor of Cowley Street.

Every so often, and particularly since the 1994 Euro-elections, there have been brief complaints from the policy enthusiasts who complain that the purity of the party's message has been obscured. Then back to the task in hand.

This process has undoubtedly been accelerated by the fact that the party happened to attract Chris Rennard, who is undoubtedly the most brilliant political campaigner of his generation.

The party is now designed in his mould. Whenever the debate between campaigns and policy pops up again, we all defend the importance of getting the message right rather than subsuming it once more to the purity of the wonks. And we feel virtuous about it.

But suddenly the situation is different. Thanks to the enormous efforts of the party's campaigners since its inception, we have now achieved three-party politics. We have managed to break into the House of Commons.

The next stage is just as tough. We have to keep all those people who experimented with voting Lib Dem for the first time this year. We have to prevent the Conservatives from recovering. We have to prepare for government, and this time it's serious.

We have to put an end to another Auld Argument: whether we replace Labour or the Conservatives. That is now an irrelevant question, designed to divide those campaigners challenging Labour from those challenging the Tories.

To form a Liberal Democrat government, we need a message that goes further than simple strategy, and which is capable of forming an electoral alliance drawn from both sides.

To do that, the policy wonks need to be brought back in from the cold – not to take over campaigning of course – but to help articulate a Liberalism that goes beyond protest. One that articulates, not so much where the current government goes wrong, but how to put right the mistakes of the whole post-war consensus and the alienation, waste and disappointment that we all know about but never quite address.

We need to articulate a kind of hope that goes beyond giving anyone a 'bloody nose' but will make Labour and Conservative voters alike look at us and wonder a little.

Because next time, there will be a reaction against Labour again, but we have to be there to catch it.

That doesn't mean a shift to the right, but to find ways of winning the enthusiastic support of Conservatives for what we have to say – and by being more ourselves. Otherwise, the argument about monkeys and typewriters implies that one day the Tories will elect a leader who can make them plausible.

It's difficult, but it's possible – the subject of another article – but we need thinkers as well as campaigners to achieve it.

Because for all these reasons, we need to re-examine the Auld policy versus campaigns Argument again.

We need to be very much more forthright

So often, our spokespeople on the media sound tentative and careful, making fine points and careful distinctions. I believe we have so internalised the idea that policy can disrupt campaigning – even that our policies (crime, Europe, immigration) are dangerously unpopular – that spokespeople have often internalised this. They sound tentative because they are.

To form a government, we need policies that are distinctively Liberal Democrat, but which we can be proud of also because we know the public are with us.

There is no chance at all of making a major political shift when we feel we are somehow smuggling Liberal Democrat policies past people. That requires serious thought, but a new forthrightness only comes with new confidence – and a sense of dovetailing with people's real concerns – in our policies as well as our campaign techniques.

To win power, we will need some tabloid support. Can we get that without shifting to the right? I believe there is a way, but it needs a great deal of work.

We need a message that is memorable

Why do the public believe some political claims, not believe others, and simply forget the rest? This is an important question, which we have tended to answer to ourselves with gut instinct.

For advertisers the answer is clearer: to get the public to believe you, they don't necessarily have to immediately agree with you. Nor do you have to beat your rival in detailed argument. But people do have to be able to see the moral underpinning to what you say.

They have to see and understand why you are saying it, see how it emerges from what you are – to recognise where you are coming from. You have to find the ethical basis and communicate it.

Nor was it just modern advertisers who used this basic rule of effective propaganda. It was also the philosophy behind the enormous success of the BBC European service in the war, that eventually managed to attract 15 million Germans to risk their lives to listen to its broadcasts, and retain a reputation for truth.

In other words, simply listing policy offers is not enough. We have to communicate why they are central to the party's morality.

We need to meet people where they actually are

The trouble with policy that is completely subsumed under campaigning needs is that it tends to get stuck in the political obsessions of yesteryear. To read all the manifestos from 2005, you might be mistaken that we were still in the 1970s.

Nothing about the voluntary sector (there are more people active in the voluntary sector than there are in full-time work), nothing about identikit high streets, nothing about the terrible work and marketing pressures on adolescents.

The trouble is that the polls about the most important issues simply reflect back to politicians what they want to hear – health, education, crime: all of them actually beg the question of what these are about.

Health might be about food – the real political issue of the moment. Education might be about self-esteem. Crime might be about neighbourhood power, the real reason for the dramatic fall in crime in New York.

We have to find our new issues by throwing away the political template and starting again.

We need to create a ferment of new ideas

That is how oppositions become governments: they become the centre of futuristic debate and, by doing so, become the place where people direct their hope. That is what the Conservatives did in the late 1970s and what New Labour did in the mid-1990s.

They may not have subscribed to all or any of the ideas that emerged, which anyway came from think tanks not from political parties, but their spokesmen were there at the heart of the debate.

They showed they were interested in new ideas. And for people looking for a potential new government, an organisation prepared to make something happen – maybe just that they can project their convictions onto – this allows the energy to build up, and the excitement, that can make a major political shift possible.

Of course, campaigns and strategy are as vital as ever but, for the next leap forward, we need something else as well – something that is capable of delivering these things.

Because we should be clear about our ambitions. It is really the biggest political shift in British politics for three generations, and you won't get there if you give the impression that your highest ambition – important as it is – is the abolition of council tax.

And you certainly won't get there if your manifesto is agreed in a vacuum with no information about campaign priorities – the situation this year.

A recent report said that the most potent force currently regenerating cities is not government money, or outside investment: it is culture.

You might say the same for the party. We have a culture instantly recognisable to insiders, but we are going to have to spread that to the electorate in a far broader way, and we are going to have to give it depth.

The Federal Policy Committee has set up a mega-working group called – at least for the moment – Meeting the Challenge, and it is due to start work this summer, with the intention of looking at some of these issues.

It could even provide the impetus for the kind of shifts in thinking we need – but we have to get behind it, make it ambitious and make it work.

But most of all, let's try and put an end to the two Auld Arguments. It isn't campaigns or policy, it is both. It isn't Right or Left, it is both.

And out of the process of ending those disputes, and collapsing both sides together again like colliding atoms, we need to create a kind of nuclear fusion that is capable of generating a whole new way of thinking that can give people genuine hope that change is possible.

David Boyle is the author of 'Authenticity: Brands, Fakes, Spin and the Lust for Real Life' (Harper Perennial) and the forthcoming 'Blondel's Song' (Viking). He is a member of the FPC. Website: www.david-boyle.co.uk

YOU CAN ALL JOIN IN

Jeremy Hargreaves reports back on the changes to Liberal Democrat policy making prompted by his booklet

Last summer, I wrote *Wasted Rainforests*, a pamphlet outlining my criticisms of the way our party's policy-making processes work, and making some suggestions for improvement (Liberator 297). Liberator kindly assisted, by organising a fringe meeting at party conference on the subject.

A number of people said they agreed with what I had said. Some were even more critical than I was, and raised further problems. Several people who understand the policy-making process better than I do, pointed out where my criticisms were misplaced or my suggestions would not work. But, overall, many people told me that *Wasted Rainforests* reflected some frustrations that they had long held.

Emboldened by this support, and much better informed by many discussions, I put together some concrete and specific proposals for the Federal Policy Committee and the Federal Conference Committee.

Both discussed these proposals – as it happened, in the same week in January. They bravely agreed to make some changes. Some will be fairly obvious, and some by their nature will be less visible but will hopefully make a useful difference.

On their own, these changes will not be enough. If we are to see the more dynamic process that many people said they wanted, it will take an effort from more than just FPC and FCC tinkering with a few processes. But I'll come on to that. First, let me tell you what we have done.

One of the key criticisms is that conference spends too much time discussing long and detailed policy motions rather than interesting current live political arguments.

In response, FCC has agreed to experiment in Blackpool this autumn with leaving a couple of significant slots in the timetable open until fairly late in the conference planning schedule (September), and to allocate these to debating live political topics rather than traditional detailed motions. The conference immediately after the general election, when there are much fewer than normal policy papers planned, is a good time to try out this kind of idea.

FCC has also agreed to help 'break up' and vary the formats used at conference, by allowing one or two slots for active groups within the party to present the work they have been doing. These might be Liberal Democrat council groups, or party bodies such as SAOs, or perhaps parliamentary departmental teams. Different parts of our large party now do a whole range of interesting things – many of which directly improve people's lives – and it would be good to spread the knowledge and good practice of them more widely – among ourselves as well as to the media.

One of the reasons we end up with some quite obscure and dull stuff on our conference agendas is perhaps that we are simply trying to fill up too many hours of conference time. So it has also been agreed that, on two mornings at autumn conference, we will start at 10.30am rather than 9am. There are plenty of other training and fringe events going on, and there is no reason why conference needs to meet from 9am to 6pm every day.

None of these changes detract from conference's role as the central (indeed the only) policy-making forum in the party. What they should do is to make it a more interesting and dynamic event.

One of the things that creates most disaffection with the conference and policy-making among party members interested in policy, is the process for submitting policy motions.

Every year, a large number of local parties, individuals and SAOs submit motions only to have them rejected by FCC, with 'poor drafting' cited as the reason in a lot of cases. None of us like to be told that we can't write, and this quite predictably enrages a whole class of people who ought to be the ones most interested in conference and policy-making.

FCC now does have some quite particular standards for how it would like policy motions to be written. Bridging this divide is vital, so FCC has agreed that, before the final deadline for motions, there will be an earlier deadline for motion submitters to put in their motion, and receive drafting advice from FCC members on what they should submit. The final say on the motion will remain with the submitter, the advice will only be about the drafting, and accepting the advice will not guarantee that the motion will be accepted for the agenda. But, if different approaches to drafting are a major barrier to motions being accepted (as they are), this should remove this particular obstacle. When I have submitted motions, they have greatly benefited from exactly this kind of assistance. In future, any submitter of a motion who does not take up this offer will be in no position to complain if it is subsequently rejected on grounds of poor drafting.

And, in response to the criticism that the requirement that policy motions 'create new policy' led to too many motions on obscure topics that we just hadn't got round to making policy on yet, FCC has stated clearly that there is no such requirement. How interesting and innovative a policy proposal is, is presumably something that FCC will consider when selecting motions, but novelty is not now a formal requirement.

FCC has agreed to draw up (in consultation with FPC) and advertise a list of topics on which it particularly invites policy motions to be submitted. In fact, this follows the practice of the last few conferences – and should be helpful

to a local party or group that is keen to contribute a motion to conference, and is seeking guidance.

Finally, FCC discussed ways in which we could make the actual debates more exciting. I think that part of the story here is that we simply don't have enough good speakers in our debates – or, if we do have them, they are strongly encouraged to speak only once during a conference.

This will perhaps be a controversial view to take in Liberator, but I would like to see more of our MPs speaking in debates. I certainly don't want to see debates comprising only wall-to-wall MPs, but it is actually now very rare for any MP to speak on anything unless they are a frontbench spokesperson. It must be possible to find a middle way here, and get more good speakers speaking, as well as encouraging new speakers through things like speaker training (including using the conference hall when conference itself is having a late start).

Of course, as well as speakers, a key element in making a debate interesting is having an interesting motion to debate in the first place. Quite a substantial proportion of the motions, especially on major topics, will continue to come from the Federal Policy Committee (FPC), and FPC has also agreed to improve the way it handles policy working groups and policy papers.

Crucially, FPC has agreed to take stronger ownership and direction of the policy papers and motions that come to conference in its name. As concrete ways of achieving this, FPC has agreed to be more specific in setting objectives for working groups and what it wants them to come up with. This won't mean writing their conclusions for them before they start, but it will mean that FPC's involvement will seem less like simply telling a working group and chair just to go away and take a look at, say, macroeconomics, and come back with whatever they want to. This won't prevent working groups from contributing their own experience and ideas, but hopefully it will make them a less totally autonomous part of the policy process.

It has also been agreed that, as well as distinguished experts in the field, policy working groups contain some members who are not experts, but have something else to contribute. But I've learnt that there is a need to be careful: there is no point in working group meetings being taken up simply by explaining to 'lay' members how policy in this particular area works, as sometimes already happens.

And, having set clearer objectives for a group, FPC will keep a closer eye on how the working group is doing and what it is coming up with. Each working group will contain two members of FPC, and FPC will discuss their draft conclusions before the group finalises them and FPC finally discusses and amends them at the end of the process.

When FPC does come finally to approve policy papers and motions, it will want to see highlighted a small number of key headline policies that the paper proposes. The FPC has also set as a specific aim motions being shorter and punchier. Instead of the motions being detailed summaries of almost everything in the accompanying paper, the paper's executive summary will do that, leaving the motion to concentrate on the bigger picture.

One of the key demands for improvement of the party's policy-making process was that policy papers that FPC brings forward to conference form part of a coherent whole, rather than simply being independent items brought forward separately on their own individual merit.

And here there really will be change. FPC has agreed to set up an exercise (currently under the title *Meeting the Challenge*), which will take a major strategic look at what the Liberal Democrats have to offer British politics. Consulting at autumn conference 2005 and concluding at autumn conference 2006, this should set our overall political direction and agenda for the next parliament – and one thing that will flow from this will be the selection of topics on which FPC will commission policy papers.

As well as setting the agenda for policy papers, *Meeting the Challenge* will also allow FCC to do some advance planning of conference agendas, to ensure that the policy areas we believe are most important and distinguish us most, feature appropriately prominently at conferences through the electoral cycle.

The aim of all these procedural changes is ultimately to assist us as a party in coming up with clear and distinctive policies, which answer the needs and wishes of the British public. I hope they do that. But, on their own, such changes to process will make little difference.

For the one thing that I have realised more frequently than anything else, through this process of proposing procedural changes, is that what will really make a difference is party members taking an active and strongly political approach, in coming up with policy ideas and putting them forward.

We can improve the structure of conference, but what really makes a conference interesting or not are the motions on the agenda – how exciting, how distinctive and how politically astute they are. FPC can take a stronger grasp of policy papers, but what really makes them worthwhile and useful is the quality of the ideas within them. And achieving this is down to, not the members of party committees, but every member of this party – and especially those who come to conference. Making conference and our policies exciting is something that needs the contribution of all of us.

So, if you think that the party's policies are too boring or inadequate, contribute your ideas to them. Propose motions to conference. Put yourself forward for contributing to working groups or election to the policy committee. Write an article. Publish a pamphlet. What makes us interesting, exciting and useful to society – as well as more newsworthy – is the quality and quantity of our ideas.

After a year of discussing the way that the intricacies of our policy processes function, my interest in questions of procedure is almost at the point of exhaustion. The new parliament offers us wonderful opportunities to contribute to British politics – not just because of the strength of our representation in parliament, but through our ideas. Thatcher drove the agenda of political ideas in the late 1970s and through the 1980s. New Labour did it through the 1990s. Who has a striking and innovative approach to bring in 2005?

The opportunity is there, in a way that it has not been for many years, for us to relate a Liberal approach to the challenges of the time – not this time through delivering more leaflets than the rest, but through the force of our ideas.

Jeremy Hargreaves is Vice-Chair of the Liberal Democrats' Federal Policy Committee and a member of the Federal Conference Committee

PEEL WITH NO APPEAL

The Liberal Democrats' right-wing fringe around the Peel Group is strategically and politically wrong because the next advance will come in Labour seats such as the near miss in Oxford East, says Bernard Gowers

Many Liberator readers will be familiar with Oxford West and Abingdon, which has been held by Evan Harris since 1997. Oxford East is less well known, an urban seat with large council estates once based on the Cowley car plant.

The Brownite former minister Andrew Smith has held it since 1987, but on 5 May the Liberal Democrat candidate Steve Goddard brought this majority tumbling down from 10,000 to 900, with an 11.8% swing.

In the county council elections, the Lib Dems won two new seats, and came second in all but one of the other seats, including some close results.

Oxford East is similar to dozens of other Lib Dem-Labour fights, and can't claim the triumph of Manchester Withington or Cambridge. However, it contains almost all the features of urban Britain and, in comparison with the other Oxfordshire constituencies, points to some general issues the party needs to address. So I don't make any apologies if what follows seems a little parochial.

Oxford East's population can be divided into five major groups. Three groups gave the Liberal Democrats strong support (please forgive a lack of specific numbers here, we don't want to do Labour's job for them):

The first was about 14,000 students, about a third from Oxford University, the rest from Oxford Brookes. These voted in line with national trends, and we were able to get a good proportion of them to the polls, easily putting Steve Goddard first.

The second was the 5-6,000 Muslim voters, mainly Urdu-speakers, but also a large number of Bangladeshis. Members of this community have become active in the local party since 2001.

They are not just motivated by Iraq and Palestine (as the press seem to think), but also, perhaps more, by the domestic agenda, especially community relations and the presentation of Muslims in the media and public debate. In short, they are motivated by liberal social concerns.

Furthermore, the economic position of the majority of the community makes them sympathetic to progressive economic policies. The Lib Dems have two Muslim city councillors (one a woman), and put up three county candidates, one of whom was successful. We have not sought to switch the Muslim communities as a series of blocks, but by engaging with their concerns on liberal terms.

The third group was the progressive middle class, centred mainly on the inner suburbs. The Greens have had more success here in local elections than almost anywhere else in the country, but this has not transferred well to Westminster polls. The majority of Green voters supported Steve Goddard, due to Iraq and civil liberties, but also economic policies such as tuition fees and the 50% income tax rate for higher earners. Surprisingly, the Green Westminster candidate did not even keep his deposit, and the Greens have not been able to break out of the trendy areas in local council contests. The social exclusivity of Oxford East's Green Party will probably limit their growth in the future.

Two groups of Oxford East's population were less strong for the Liberal Democrats.

The first of these was the white working class, the biggest single section of Oxford East's electorate. Labour piled up their majority on the council estates, but we did better than expected, especially in those areas where we have established a local network.

Our county councillors were all elected with significant working-class support. A curious populist leftist group, the Independent Working-Class Association, has won city council seats in the last couple of years, by concentrating on local issues like rubbish collection rather than traditional leftist concerns such as international affairs. They put up three county candidates this year, but were beaten by Labour due to the higher turnout at the national elections (however, opinion is divided as to who won the fight between Labour and IWCA activists that broke out at the count). The areas of IWCA support lack strong Lib Dem networks, but Lib Dem candidates beat all but one of them in the county elections, so we need not fear moving into these areas in the future.

The other group among whom we fared less well was the socially conservative middle class, mainly in the outer suburbs. We did not squeeze the Tory vote as well as other Lib Dem campaigns have in the past and, where we did, it was on a strategic rather than ideological grounds.

These five groups in Oxford East form a microcosm of urban Britain in general, but most of the rest of the county is far more rural. To compare Oxford East with the other Oxfordshire results, there was a swing towards the Tories in all the Tory-held rural seats; Wantage, Witney, Banbury and Henley (next door to Newbury). This also provided the Tories with overall control of the county council for the first time in 20 years. In Oxford West and Abingdon, there was also a swing to the Tories against Evan Harris, although this may disguise an increase in his support in the urban part of

the constituency, especially from Labour voters. Evan devoted some of his energy to providing a great deal of support for Oxford East.

What are the implications of this for the Lib Dems? The Peel Group website (which appears not to have been updated for a year) says, "we will need to gain new votes and new members from the moderate Conservative tradition… In most of our present parliamentary seats, we face the Tories as our main challengers. In a substantial majority of our target seats at the next election we will be up against Tory incumbents… Our success will in part depend on our ability to garner support from those who have usually identified with the Tories".

From a strategic view, the general election results make the Peel Group's position untenable.

The results in Oxfordshire and across the country suggest that the Lib Dems have already reached a high-water mark against the Tories in most rural areas (although of course this does not rule out taking individual seats from them in the future). Our best results were all against Labour.

It is also difficult to see what is left of the 'moderate Conservative' tradition among Tories after Thatcherism and a decade or more of New Labour and Lib Dem advances. The national Tory campaign this time consolidated right-wing elements in the Conservative tradition. In Oxford East, the Tories put out a vile leaflet only about immigration, which pressed all the buttons for racist voters. Those Tory voters who switched to us did so on tactical anti-Labour grounds, rather than any ideological sympathy. I'm not sure that there are any 'nice Tories' left.

It could be objected that the Liberal Democrats need to move even further to the right to mop up more Tory votes. Yet, moral considerations aside, there is no room on the political landscape for another right-of-centre party. Furthermore, in most seats where we're fighting Labour (including Oxford East), we have not begun to do everything that we can to build our networks and credibility. Oxford East is now number four on the national target list, but the Lib Dems there were not able to fight every area nearly as intensively as they will in 2009. This is not true in most rural and suburban seats, where we are already fighting the Tories, and have been for a decade or more. Most of our gains this year were from Labour, and it is difficult to envisage this not being the case in 2009.

In policy terms, the one area in which Labour could land some punches against us, nationally and in Oxford East, was on some economic matters. This was in part due to twisting the truth on specific policies such as pensions and local income tax. But, in general, we can sound too much like a middle-class support agency. We have sound policies on student debt and free personal care for the elderly.

However, we can do more to develop more economically progressive policies, and sound more like we are driven by a passion for social justice (as I think most Lib Dems are). This does not mean that we should simply retreat to the post-war welfare state consensus, but think more about liberal alternatives to improving the lot of the poorest in our society. From a strategic viewpoint, this will also do most to increase our appeal among the working-class voters who are already abandoning Labour.

Strangely, it is on economic, rather than social, issues that Liberal Future, the Peel Group and friends are most interested in moving the Liberal Democrats to the right. Again this is strategically unconvincing. The Greens and IWCA will not be a major challenge to us in Oxford East or across the country, but they are a reminder that we cannot take the disillusioned Labour vote for granted.

The message that can be taken from the election results in Oxford East and across Oxfordshire seems fairly clear: There are massive strategic possibilities for the Liberal Democrats in pursuing a radical liberal agenda.

Bernard Gowers was press officer for the Oxford East Liberal Democrats' election campaign this year.

KING TONY'S COURT

The basis of Prime Minister Tony Blair's politics is a deep authoritarianism that denies the validity of any alternative view, argues Simon Kovar

Electoral tides may ebb and flow, but Tony Blair appears to be an immovable presence in our political landscape. Perhaps this is fitting for a Prime Minister who has all along appeared to float above the 'formality' of political institutions and processes.

As he arrived back in Downing Street on 6 May, he appeared less as a political leader with a fresh electoral mandate than as a chastened monarch returned after travels among his grumbling subjects. He had, he said, 'listened' and now it was time to 'move on'.

The image is not accidental. It is a particular type of political leadership, which is pre-democratic in its idioms, yet which operates within the 'motions' of modern, electoral politics. This is monarchical politics in what is, ostensibly, a liberal democracy.

There have been various abortive attempts to define a 'new' governing philosophy for New Labour – from 'communitarian' theorising, through to the 'Third Way' and more recent ponderings over the meaning of 'progressivism'. Yet none of these has been able to identify a coherent philosophical core to explain or legitimise the practice.

Since his election as Labour leader in 1994, Blair has been described as a Social Democrat, a Liberal (both Gladstonian and Edwardian), a Christian Democrat, a Neo-Conservative, and an old-fashioned Tory. But he has eluded all the standard terms of political definition, and explicitly rejects what he describes as the 'prejudices' of political philosophy. His approach reflects not so much a rejection of ideological 'dogma' as a disdain for political philosophy in a much wider sense. He prefers an apolitical language of 'values' and morals (of doing 'what is right').

The goal is 'delivery': a value-neutral term, which says little about the direction in which Blair wishes to take the country. Perhaps, in this sense, he is a leader who reflects society's prevailing mood of anti-politics, but he also feeds upon and sustains it. His is a landscape drained of theoretical content or meaning, and in such a vacuum it is the personality and power squabbles – the panoply of his 'court' – which dominate the stage.

This matters because political philosophy defines not only purpose and direction, but also the boundaries of legitimate political action. If political power is not anchored in a philosophical 'bottom line', then we lose an important constraint on its use, particularly in day-to-day decision-making outside the confines of an election manifesto.

Political philosophy also makes political action intelligible and facilitates democratic political choice. When politics is drained of philosophical content, the structure of democratic political choice breaks down. In his 2004 Labour Party conference speech, Blair described the motivating values of New Labour as 'the impulses of any decent human spirit'. Any opposition, asked to counter such 'impulses', faces a rather tall order. Blair's talent has been to structure political choices in such a way as to imply that there is no choice.

The central point about Blair is not that he has failed to define himself, but rather that he has been hugely successfully in defining his opposition. More accurately, he has defined himself *in relation* to his definition of those who oppose or criticise him – the 'forces of conservatism' as he put it in his 1999 Labour Party conference speech. On the one side, he said, are 'the forces of progress', who are trying to 'modernise the nation' and to create 'a New Britain'. On the other side there are the 'forces of conservatism', of 'privilege', which represent 'the old order', 'the old class divisions, old structures, old prejudices, old ways of working and of doing things.' 'Today's Tory party', he said, is 'the party of fox hunting, Pinochet and hereditary peers'.

But Blair's 'forces of conservatism' encompass a much wider range of opinion than that represented by the traditional right. For him, these forces include the socialist left and public sector professionals, and also liberals and 'civil liberties groups' – those, as he put it, who argue 'libertarian nonsense masquerading as freedom'. The speech ends with a potted summary: 'Arrayed against us: the forces of conservatism, the cynics, the elites, the establishment… On our side, the forces of modernity and justice, those who believe in a Britain for all the people.' In this context, 'party and nation [are] joined in the same cause for the same purpose' – and, of course, if 'party and nation' are one, then there can be no legitimate opposition. The 'forces of conservatism', in other words, are anybody who suggests that Blair might be wrong.

This strategy is not new. It is one that Gladstone criticised in 1878 when he referred to the tendency of Conservatives to don the political 'halo'; and 'as they are contending, forsooth, on behalf of the greatness of England,' he wrote, 'it follows that they are enabled at once to place all opponents in the category of contenders for its littleness.'

It was developed into an art form by India's one-time prime minister, Indira Gandhi, who was astute at defining herself in relation to her disparate opposition, with particular effect in the run up to the split in the Congress Party in 1969 and the general election of 1971. In her 'Open Letter to Members of the Congress Party' on 18 November 1969, she defined the split as 'a conflict between two outlooks and attitudes' and (somewhat implausibly) 'certainly not a fight for power'. On the one side, she said, are 'those who are for socialism, for change and for the fullest internal democracy'. On the other are 'the forces of status quo, with close links with powerful economic interests', representing 'the narrow purposes and interests of a limited section', and 'a vested

interest in power.' I speak the language of socialism, Mrs Gandhi once said, because that is what people want to hear. Hers was a monarchical politics, in which power was de-institutionalised and concentrated on the person.

A corollary was Gandhi's ability to rise above the murkier aspects of her regime, notably during the 'Emergency' of 1975/77 when she suspended elections and constitutionally protected civil rights, and locked up most of her opposition. Blame for Emergency 'excesses' focused not on Gandhi – who was supposedly 'kept in the dark', for example over the controversial population control and urban 'beautification' campaigns – but rather on unscrupulous courtiers and 'over-zealous' junior officials.

Thus, despite the abuses of the constitution that lead to her sweeping defeat in the general election of 1977, she was returned to power in the election of 1980. According to an eyewitness, she was visibly shaking with anger as she replied to a Scandinavian journalist who asked her how she felt to be India's leader once again. 'I have always been India's leader', she said.

Gandhi challenged liberal democratic procedural norms and constitutional or legal checks as illegitimate obstacles to the popular will and to social progress. At a rhetorical level, this process juxtaposed the forces of 'progress' and 'socialism' against those of 'foreign' reaction, conservatism, and vested interests. Thus opposition itself was deemed illegitimate.

This language of politics found its most succinct expression in the 1971 election, which was successfully defined in terms of a plebiscite-style choice between *Indira hatao* (remove Indira) and *garibi hatao* (remove poverty). In practical terms, this process meant the subversion of institutional checks on prime ministerial authority and moves to prevent the emergence of alternative sources of patronage or power.

The parallels with Tony Blair's leadership are striking. Liberal democratic procedural norms are shunned in favour of a 'courtly' politics of patronage and access to the personage of the sovereign. This is not, as some have suggested, a 'presidential' style of government. The Butler Report uses the word 'informality' to describe prime ministerial decision-making under Blair. His style is 'monarchical' – as historians such as Conrad Russell, David Starkey and Peter Hennessy have pointed out.

It is in this context that the true significance of the hunting debate emerges. Hunting is in many ways a defining issue for Tony Blair – and not because he believes in the intrinsic importance of the issue itself. During an appearance on the BBC's *Question Time* in the middle of 1999, he blamed the House of Lords for obstructing a ban and claimed that 'the people who are holding it up aren't actually on my side'. The legislation was, in fact, blocked in the Commons and, while Blair promised to 'continue' to vote for a ban, he failed to take part in any of the eight subsequent divisions on the subject, and ultimately supported a compromise. This was never an issue on which he was prepared to take to the barricades, which leaves us with the question of just why he allowed it to become so important.

As Blair's 1999 conference speech makes clear, he was well aware of the potency of the hunting issue in terms of the way it divided the country. The key is to consider those who Blair said or implied were not 'on my side'. Allied against those representing 'the impulses of any decent human spirit' were far-right sympathisers, throwbacks to a bygone age, and a distasteful social-set grounded in class distinctions and cruelty to other creatures. In other words, this was a classic line-up of the 'forces of conservatism'.

From Blair's perspective, the hunting issue divided the country along just the right lines (while having the added attraction of being a distraction from issues that really mattered). It has been by posing this sort of dichotomy that Blair has been able to retain his hold on power. While he is on the wrong side of public opinion on many of the major issues, he is consistently judged favourably when viewed *in relation to his opposition*, and his skill as a politician has been to define that opposition in his own terms.

What are the consequences of this kind of politics? At an obvious level, it shuts down debate, for how can you argue with basic goodness? In this sense it is anti-political. The corollary is that Blair cannot be held accountable for anything, since he is merely trying to do the 'right thing'.

Second, it is extremely authoritarian. The claim is that alternative political philosophies (or 'prejudices' as Blair calls them) are dead. Instead we have 'values', and the enemies then become those who subvert those values. Democracy, in this reading, is impossible because values can't be debated: they are prescriptive. If you question them, you are not a nice person.

The 'enemies', according to Peter Mandelson and Roger Liddle (in their book *The Blair Revolution*) are those who deviate from 'the values that government believes society ought to hold dear.' Finally, there are wider and deeper implications for the type of society in which we live. In a recent speech, the Indian High Commissioner, Kamalesh Sharma, reflected on the political thinking of India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, and observed that 'unless you have an enlightened politics, it is very difficult to have an enlightened anything else'.

The argument is important because it places politics at the heart of how we live our lives. A politics that reflects popular prejudices will reinforce those prejudices. Attempts to 'address public concerns' about asylum seekers will not hold the bridge against the extreme right, but will wave them across. Unless our politics is about seeking to change popular, as well as institutional, assumptions, then it is not about changing very much at all.

Simon Kovar was a parliamentary researcher, 2000/05 for David Rendel and for the Liberal Democrat education team.

THE CHECK IS NOT IN THE POST!

The postal voting system is fundamentally flawed and has undermined Britain's 130-year tradition of electoral probity, says Michael Meadowcroft

It was the Labour government's cynical decision to have a number of all-postal ballots at the 2004 local elections that highlighted the dangers of all-absentee voting.

The abuses inherent in postal and proxy voting have always been there but retail rather than wholesale. Now, in the course of a single year, through a handful of high profile cases before the courts, the dangers and the potential for massive electoral manipulation have been vividly exposed.

Over recent years, working in new and emerging democracies, when I emphasised the vital necessity of an independent and powerful electoral commission to guarantee the legitimacy of the electoral process, it would always be pointed out to me that Britain had never had such a commission. Somewhat feebly I would respond that Britain had had genuine co-operation between its major parties for 130 years, which had maintained and improved the security of its elections, and that, consequently, we had never perceived a need for an electoral commission.

Then, in November 2000, came the appointment of the Electoral Commission, with only advisory powers, the end of the party consensus and, paradoxically, the destruction of Britain's electoral reputation.

The postal voting scandal is not some minor problem on the fringe of electoral practice. It is an issue of immense importance, which opens the door to electoral fraud on a grand scale. Well-organised political parties and unscrupulous candidates can multiply the number of postal votes to such an extent that the result in any relatively marginal seat can be manipulated.

All of us who have kept a detailed marked register know that the non-voters are to a great extent the same people at every election. Postal votes can be applied for in the names of this substantial minority of electors with relative impunity in the knowledge that they are unlikely to notice. The personation of an elector at a polling station is inhibited by the publication following polling day of the official marked register showing who has voted. This register is available for inspection for six months after each election and can be copied. It enables party agents, for instance, to check on whether deceased electors are marked as having voted, or those registered in unoccupied houses. There is no such marked register for postal votes and, therefore, no such check is possible.

Election courts are exceptionally rare in Britain. Quite apart from the inhibiting requirement to pay large amounts of cash into the court in advance, as security for costs, the British electoral system has always been remarkably free from abuse. We even have safeguards which were hardly ever used in recent years, but which are now being revived. For instance, a candidate may appoint 'Polling Agents' who are permitted inside the polling station, in theory to challenge electors they believe are not entitled to vote. Apart from in Northern Ireland, I doubt whether, at least until recently, many candidates made such appointments.

I also recall telling an election official in the Philippines that, at the close of the poll in Britain, the official in charge of the polling station seals the ballot box, puts it in his car and drives to the town hall to deposit it at the count. He was astonished and asked, "and no-one steals it?" Here, apart from the occasional election expenses scandal, there have been very few offences.

All that has now changed with the government's obsession with postal voting for all. The evidence that unfolded in the two Birmingham cases, of systematic manipulation of applications, diversion of ballot envelopes to 'safe' addresses, threats of violence to those who resisted giving up their ballots, votes being 'auctioned', and the warehouse with hundreds of open postal vote envelopes being filled in or altered. Judge Richard Mawrey QC, who presided over the trial, was right to say that the current postal voting system is "an open invitation to fraud" and that "someone so inclined could defraud the system."

Quite so, and that is why the equivocations of those – including, heaven help us, the spokesman for the Electoral Reform Society – who trot out the mantra that they "are opposed to extending postal voting until the proper safeguards are put in place," are simply naive.

The public really have to appreciate that it is impossible to safeguard any voting away from a designated, supervised and observed polling place. Why does anyone think that those of us on the international election circuit always recommend strongly against absentee voting and, instead, encourage the use of mobile ballot boxes taken round to hospitals, retirement homes, etc., always accompanied by party agents and observers?

There is talk of liaison between the Electoral Commission and Chief Police Officers so that the police will know what to do if someone arrives at a police station to report that their vote has been stolen! When it gets to that point, it is far too late. Are we going to have hundreds of election courts after each poll? With results overturned? Fresh elections? Governments in suspense in case they are overturned as a consequence of multiple by-elections?

Just one week after polling day, it was reported that a quarter of Britain's police forces were already involved in investigations into alleged postal vote fraud. Hard on the heels of this news came the government's admission that major changes are needed to improve the security of postal voting. A range of proposals, including signatures on application forms and bar codes in place of serial numbers, all backed up by new elections offences with a maximum of five years imprisonment.

None of these measures will improve the secrecy of postal voting but they will require more time for officials to verify the legitimacy of both application and actual vote. The earlier the closing date for postal ballots the less the impact of the election campaign on the public.

There has also been the wonderfully naive proposal – enshrined apparently in an Electoral Commission code of practice – that party workers should not handle postal votes! It is unenforceable – is it seriously envisaged, for instance, that there will be a compulsory register of all party workers? And it is loopy – would party workers be forbidden to assist family members and, for that matter, close friends, with the transmission of their postal votes?

The cases before the courts show only a tiny sample of the manipulations that went on at these elections. Many of them are a consequence of the intensely patriarchal society that exists within a number of ethnic minorities. These manipulations, and dozens of tricks incapable of being spotted, were predicted in advance in February and June last year. In the light of all the evidence, the Electoral Commission has finally accepted that all-postal ballots are unsafe and recommended that their use be discontinued. And the Labour government's response to this advice from the independent commission set up to advise on electoral administration? It ignored it. I find this astonishing. A party of government whose representatives have been caught in the act of electoral fraud, as a direct consequence of laws it has passed, has the nerve to disregard all the evidence and the recommendation of the independent Electoral Commission and simply to continue with a flawed electoral process for party advantage. It demonstrates just how far Labour has abandoned any ethical pretensions. Robert Mugabe would be very proud of such emulation.

We now have evidence of massive increases in applications for postal votes, not spontaneously arriving across the board from individual electors but fostered by party activists in particular wards and constituencies – including the same Birmingham wards that have just come before the courts. The potential for abuse is massive and I have no doubt that a number of marginal seats will be 'stolen' by those who set out to drive a horse and cart across the welcome mat and through the wide open door for abuse proffered by postal voting.

All absentee voting is vulnerable and should be minimised. Ideally it should only be available to for those physically outside the constituency on polling day, and even then with better safeguards for proof of identity. Everyone else unable to reach a polling station should be able to apply for a mobile ballot box to visit them.

What now for the Electoral Commission? It is in an impossible situation. Set up, against the advice of many professionals, in the opposite situation to Stanley Baldwin's well-known quote about journalists, it has responsibility without power. It was emasculated from day one by having only an advisory role – a situation that would never be permitted in any new or emerging democracy, where the executive authority of the independent electoral commission is a crucial component in the legitimacy of the electoral process. Curiously, also, anyone with previous experience in party politics was specifically excluded from membership. The Commission consequently lacks members personally aware of the tricks of the trade. Poachers turned gamekeepers are always more effective. There is simply no point in having an advisory commission that can be so cavalierly disregarded by the government. Having failed to succeed by moral imperative, its only remaining weapon is embarrassment. If it knuckles under to the government now, its reputation will be ruined. The only action left to the commissioners is to resign. To do so in the defence of Britain's cherished reputation for electoral probity would be both honourable and effective. To stay in office would be to acknowledge that the government – any government – can get away with electoral manipulation.

Over the 130 years from the Ballot Act of 1872, Britain developed an electoral administration trusted at home and respected around the world. It has taken one solitary, miserable year to undermine it. It is time for a massive cross-party campaign to restore the integrity of our electoral process.

Michael Meadowcroft has led, or been a member of, 47 missions to 31 different countries, assisting in the transition to multi-party democracy. He was Liberal MP for Leeds West, 1983-87. Website: www.bramley.demon.co.uk

ON THE MONEY

The Liberal Democrats will not perform better without improving their fundraising, says Edward Lord

The Liberal Democrats did well at this general election, with the largest number of seats for 80 years. We also ran a truly national operation with consistent messages, a slick advertising campaign and effective use of direct mail. This, combined with our targeting strategy and a lot of hard graft, brought success.

And yet there is still a feeling that we could have done better. Sniping articles have appeared in the national press together with questioning letters in Lib Dem News and muttering in Westminster and around the country.

"Only 62?" the voices say. "I thought we'd get more than that". Well could we? Maybe, but probably not. It's clear that Blair's squeeze message in the final week worked, as did Howard's heartland appeal.

But that's not only the reason we didn't do better. It can be summed up in one word – money.

Yet again this year, the other two parties outgunned us massively. They will have spent close to the maximum allowable £20m. In some target seats, that means they spent £50-100,000 on direct mail, local advertising and call centres. We are unlikely to have reached £5m on the national campaign.

Even in peacetime, the party's resources are tiny compared with the Tories and Labour. In 2003, Labour brought in £13.6m from fundraising, legacies and commercial activities (mainly its conference). That was before the £6.7m in affiliation fees from trade unions and £3.4m in members' subscriptions. The Conservatives, in the same period, raised £7.6m (of which around £1m was constituency quotas), excluding conference income.

In the same period, a combined Lib Dem group comprising the federal party, state parties, the parliamentary party (POLD), ALDC, and federal fundraising agencies (Liberty Network and Business Forum) raised: donations, £1,893,939; fundraising, £202,252; affinity/business £130,862; grants £2,000,287; conferences £746,993, making a total of £4,974,333.

What is significant for the Liberal Democrats in this national comparison is that Labour came from a standing start 10 years ago. It was only when people started believing they could win and when they started investing in fundraising that they were able to move away from their reliance on individual members and trade unions. And in both cases, investment in fundraising is key. The Conservatives spent £550,000 on their fundraising in 2003 and Labour spent £647,000. Our consolidated cost of fundraising activities in 2003 was around £216,000.

At a local level, there is a stark differential too. In the table below are a number of key seats in England (both held and target) showing the incoming resources of our local party and the Tories:

Key Seat	Lib Dem	Tory	%age diff.
Bath	29,078	60,322	107%
Cheltenham	31,787	52,881	66%
Harrogate	50,842	63,036	24%
Maidenhead	25,212	96,655	283%
Mid Dorset	23,730	29,662	25%
North Norfolk	40,218	61,200	52%
Orpington	48,768	43,639	-11%
Oxford West	42,659	34,114	-20%
Somerton & Frome	30,631	82,926	171%
SW Surrey	39,770	102,978	159%
Southport	29,463	52,826	79%
Taunton	31,941	75,898	138%
Twickenham & Richmond	67,327	146,086	117%
Winchester	41,638	95,634	130%

Returns for the Labour Party are few and far between, as most constituencies do not reach the reporting threshold. However, many Labour campaign and employment costs are met from the party centrally and would not show up on local accounts.

Of course, there is a philosophical issue for some people about fundraising. After all, it is well known that both the Tories and Labour have readily accepted funds from people that Liberal Democrats might consider beyond the pale. And there is a fear that taking money from wealthy people or businesses may compromise our integrity and influence our policies.

The truth is that fundraising in and of itself doesn't have to be unethical. Many charities and campaigning organisations that Lib Dem members may support run highly successful income generation ventures without taking funds from inappropriate sources or forfeiting their principles. I am certain we too are able to run a successful open, accountable and principled fundraising operation within a modern democratic member-led party.

In truth, we have to increase income. During the course of this parliament, we will undoubtedly be looking to extend our targeting programme to some or all of the 189 second-placed constituencies, and consolidate those we hold. If we don't increase our income, this will place an enormous strain on central and local resources.

The message is simple: The more money we have, the more adverts we can buy, the more direct mail we can send, the more telephone calls we can make and the more seats we can win.

There are a number of issues we have to address. First and foremost is being clear about how much we need and what we need it for.

As a professional fundraiser, I am convinced that we are more than capable of at least doubling our income over the next four years. However, to persuade donors, who will only treat us seriously if they believe that we take our chances seriously, we must have a clear spending plan and show how that will secure further electoral success.

To be credible, the party needs to define costed strategic goals, which must be political and organisational and could include answering questions such as: Do we want to at least double the number of professional local organisers and regional campaign officers? Do we want to improve the support mechanisms (research, etc.) for our front bench spokespeople in Westminster? Do we want to enhance the central and regional press teams so that we are fighting on the same terms as the other two parties? Do we want to set up national call centres to help telephone canvassing in our weaker target seats?

The second issue is being radical about the way we structure our party organisation, to deliver successful income generation and to do so in an accountable way. This may involve challenging some of the party's shibboleths.

Leadership of income generation is somewhat convoluted. Constitutionally, the party treasurer is responsible to the Federal Executive and the Federal Finance and Administration Committee for fundraising. Yet clearly others have an active and legitimate role to play. But this is not always spelled out and different peoples' roles lead to confusion both internally and with donors.

Also, the silo approach in Cowley Street is not conducive to success. There needs to be greater integration between the treasurer's unit (whose staff are comparatively inexperienced and whose roles seem to be narrowly defined into running Liberty Network, Business Forum and the Party Ball); the membership department (which manages direct mail and telephone appeals); and the conference office (which has contact with exhibitors and commercial observers, and which could also become involved in other activities).

Additionally, it has to be questioned why the federal party, parliamentary party, ALDC, Liberty Network, the Business Forum and other bodies exist as separate legal entities, in many cases pursuing their own fundraising. There does not appear to be a good legal reason for the distinction and it seems like a distraction to have so many Liberal Democrats chasing after comparatively few donors.

That brings me on to the third issue, increasing the pool of supporters and managing them better. The funds we raise nationally and locally come almost exclusively from our small number of dedicated party members, which cannot realistically be stretched much further.

At the highest level (£10,000 plus), we must identify prospective major donors from various sources such as Liberty Network members; disillusioned socially liberal former Labour or Tory donors; and anyone else we believe may have a propensity and resources to support the party.

Research will be absolutely crucial. For each major donor prospect, we should have details of their background, their business, their known wealth and other causes they support. This not only allows us to plan to ask successfully for the correct amount, but also to complete reasonable due diligence that those from whom we accept funds are fit and proper sources.

At the mid range (£1,000 to £10,000), Liberty Network has been a success so far and should continue in its current form running a similar profile of events, albeit in a more open way, with regular reports to the FE. Its aims should be to increase the number of members and the value of contributions from existing supporters, perhaps through a series of face-to-face visits by fundraising staff.

At the lower end, the party will need to supplement significantly the database from which appeals are launched. Virtually every local party – and certainly those in held, target and starred seats – will have good quality canvass data, which should be transferred to the Cowley Street main fundraising database and used for appeals in the autumn.

An aim across the fundraising team should be improving the party's legacy development programme. In each of 2002 and 2003, Labour received just under £600,000 in legacies. With careful planning and cultivation, we should be able to build up a reasonable regular income stream from this source.

Businesses, at least those that are decently run, should not be a closed book to the Liberal Democrats. However, we need to be better at dealing with them. There is a case for consolidating all corporate contacts in one department. They should be the interface between the party and business, and be responsible for arranging liaison between the front bench and business leaders as well as selling exhibition space at conferences; advertising; tickets for the Ball, dinners and conference corporate day; and membership (where appropriate) of the Business Forum. Running these links from one office will mean better tracking of relationships and consequently more openness and accountability.

There also needs to be a radical overhaul of how our local operations are funded. Most local parties exist hand to mouth. Supper clubs, garden parties, jumble sales and the like have their place, but none of them will bring in significant sums to win elections.

In each held seat, the MP should organise a local patrons' club charging £500 to £1,000 per head for membership, with three or four functions a year at the Commons and in the constituency.

For target seats, we should require each Liberal Democrat peer to sponsor an event for at least two target seats in the House of Lords every year, ideally to start a patrons' club, which the candidate can takeover when elected.

In all seats, canvass data ought to be used to do a regular (once or twice a year) appeal to 'defs and probs'. This appeal should be based primarily on raising funds, as well as recruiting members and activists.

This new approach should be backed up with good quality training, and assisted by a support desk at Cowley Street and through the regional campaign officer network.

The period immediately after an election provides time not just for reflection, but also for change. To win in 2009, we have to change our fundraising approach.

Edward Lord is a professional fundraising adviser. He is a Liberty Network board member and is on the executive of Islington Liberal Democrats.

BRIDGING THE GAP

Campaigners must take more interest in policy and policy-makers must think more about campaigning if the Lib Dems are to prosper, says Iain Sharpe

It's no use pretending. It hurts to lose! We didn't quite manage to win Watford, where we were fighting our first target seat campaign. We can take comfort from the 14 per cent increase in our vote share and the 13 per cent swing from Labour to the Lib Dems. In what was previously a Labour–Conservative marginal where we got only 17 per cent of the vote in 2001, we leapfrogged the Tories and finished just 1,148 votes behind Labour. Watford is now the seventh most winnable seat in the country for the Liberal Democrats. But for the next four years, we will still have a Labour MP.

I won't dwell too long on how we made such progress. It's a familiar story, involving an enormous amount of literature, from tabloid newspapers to targeted letters and from full colour election addresses to ward newsletters. There was also lots of canvassing, plenty of posters and hard work on polling day. Most Liberator readers will get the picture.

We already had a strong local government base in 2001 and often outpolled both other parties across the constituency in local elections. We were looking for a way to escape from third place in the parliamentary seat.

Our big chance came when Labour opted to go for a directly-elected mayor for Watford Borough in 2002. We were able to convert our local strength into an effective borough-wide campaign and Dorothy Thornhill won comfortably for the Lib Dems. This gave us the credibility of winning not just a series of local wards, but a major election with a 60,000 electorate.

Watford Borough makes up around 80 per cent of the Watford constituency. The rest is in Three Rivers, which the Lib Dems have controlled for many years. So it was no longer quite so easy for the other parties to portray us as also-rans. Subsequent successful local and European election results reinforced this sense that we were serious challengers. So did the fact that we ran a proper integrated campaign for two years, vigorously promoting our excellent parliamentary candidate Sal Brinton in all our literature. This gave us the springboard for a great leap forward in the parliamentary election. But victory will have to wait until next time.

From my perspective of writing literature for the Watford target seat campaign, there are a good few lessons to be learned. The first is that local campaigners should not be afraid of proper parliamentary campaigns. There are still many Liberal Democrat activists and councillors who regard general elections as an irritating distraction from winning council seats. They fear that too much emphasis on politics will damage their wholesome, almost apolitical, local image. This campaign should have laid that myth to rest. In Watford and other areas with double elections, a strong general election campaign enhanced local election performance.

But there are wider and more important issues too. Like it or not, our policies on crime and punishment proved to be an Achilles heel. I take no pleasure in saying this as one who holds sound liberal views on such things. The relentless attacks from both other parties about votes for prisoners and mandatory life sentences were played back to us on the doorstep by voters. They clearly had a negative effect on our vote.

I suppose this is what 'dog-whistle' politics means. The commitment to end mandatory life sentences for murder is limited and specific, so that a battered wife who kills her violent husband does not automatically get the same sentence as a mass murderer. But the constant repetition was designed to imply that we think convicted murderers should generally be free to walk the streets. Voters who raised the issue on the doorstep were often satisfied with the explanation. But I suspect many more didn't find out our side of the story and took their votes elsewhere.

It is depressing because this sort of thing makes it impossible to have mature debate without our policies being caricatured. It is worth saying here that this is precisely the problem Mark Oaten has been trying to grapple with as Home Affairs spokesman. For his pains, he has faced heavy criticism, not least in the pages of Liberator, for being too authoritarian and right-wing. But the experience of this election suggests that he has been asking the right question – how we can have humane and liberal policies, without appearing irresponsible or eccentric? So the radical Liberal attack dogs should stop trying to hunt down Mark Oaten. We need a genuine debate about how to resolve these important questions. And much the same applies to those such as Vincent Cable or David Laws, whose attempts to update liberalism for the twenty-first century are misrepresented by some as a sort of neo-Thatcherism.

More generally, we must reconnect the policy-making and campaigning sides of the party. I wasn't in the conference chamber when we agreed to support votes for prisoners and I doubt whether many other people who are closely involved in target seat campaigns were there either. Increasingly, the Liberal Democrats have two parallel but separate party conferences. One takes place in the main hall where a smattering of delegates hear dull but worthy debates on well-meaning policy papers and motions. The other is in the training sessions, where campaigners learn ways of writing ever more sophisticated target letters or maintaining a delivery network. Sometimes there appears to be little or no crossover. I have known delegates boast that they have not attended a single debate at conference.

At risk of sounding too much like Lord McNally, I think there really is a problem with policy being produced by a working party comprising people passionately interested in a subject and then debated at conference in front of a largely empty hall. As this election has shown, in future the detail of our policy will be subject to increasing scrutiny and we can no longer afford to be slapdash. Likewise, we need to be more professional in marketing our policies. Local income tax was perhaps the most obvious example of a flagship policy that backfired during the election, because we were not properly geared up to defending it.

We also need to consider whether some aggressive defence is possible on policies that are genuinely liberal but potentially controversial. Instead of focusing relentlessly on key themes such as health, schools, police, pensioners and students, we should take time to explain why we oppose mandatory life sentences. In doing so we might even convert a few people to liberalism rather than just persuading them to 'vote for us this time'.

Finally, we need to conduct these and other debates in a way that is not spun as a leadership versus activists split. In reality, the number of partisans in this supposed division is quite small, but both sides are guilty of talking it up. I don't think many people in the party really believe either that the leadership is trying to stifle debate and enforce conformity or that most activists are irresponsible extremists. But those who do believe such things often have the ear of journalists.

This time, we need to be more disciplined in our deliberations. The party has a great opportunity over the next four years to emerge as a genuine champion of liberal values – a party that is both progressive and responsible. One of the most encouraging things about this election is that our commitment to civil liberties has clearly won us new friends. There are some excellent new Liberal Democrat MPs who will enhance the party's national credibility. During this campaign, I have felt proud to be part of the Liberal Democrats. We have an opportunity over the next four years to benefit if the shine continues to wear off New Labour. But there are dangers too. We are most likely to prosper if we can now look into the fallout from this election and plan for the future in a way that is open but not acrimonious.

Iain Sharpe is a Liberal Democrat councillor in Watford

CONSERVATIVE TO THE CORE

The Tory vote is as low as it will go, and tailoring Liberal Democrat policies to appeal to Tory voters is politically dishonest and electorally suicidal, says Andy White

Vincent Cable's call in the Guardian on 7 May would seem to suggest that there are thousands of Conservatives out there just waiting to fall into the arms of a new, fiscally responsible Liberal Democratic party. I disagree.

I will start with a confession: I am a left-leaning member of the party and have little time for calls for the injection of more private finance into the public sector. While I have this ideological difference with those on the right of the party, I would be receptive to their views on the party's future direction if I really believed that they paved the way for electoral success.

However, I believe that those who pin their hopes on a collapse of the Conservative Party's vote are fundamentally wrong, as is evidenced by the recent failure of the 'decapitation' strategy.

Under the existing electoral system, a breakthrough by the third party will always be difficult to achieve. Regardless of the distribution of votes, the short-term aim of the Liberal Democrats should be to aim to achieve a vote of a nearly 30% in a general election. At this level, the number of seats held by the party would become much more proportional in relation to its share of the vote. This, of course, would represent a rise of only about 7 or 8% on the party's showing on 5 May. It is tempting to think that the bulk of these votes can come disillusioned Conservatives, but it is wrong.

A glance at the general election results since 1923 shows that on only one occasion, when the Labour Party garnered 27.6% in 1983, has either of the two main parties polled less than 30%.

When the Conservative vote collapsed to 30.7% in the 1997 general election, it was Labour that was the main beneficiary. Despite the Liberal Democrats increasing their number of seats from 20 to 46, their share of the vote dropped from 17.8% to 16.8%. Conversely, the 8% reduction in Labour support since 1997 has been accompanied by a rise of 5.2% in the Liberal Democrat vote, while the Conservatives have risen a mere 1.6%.

This illustrates two things: that the Conservatives have a substantial core vote, the existence of which makes it unlikely that their vote will fall below 30%; and that the Liberal Democrat vote share appears to be more dependent on the vicissitudes of the Labour Party's fortunes than it does on the Conservatives.

The argument that was used in the election was that, as most of our target seats were held by Conservatives, our policies should be geared towards attracting defectors from that party. Leaving aside the wisdom of subverting policy-making to short-term electoral considerations, in this election the electoral map has shifted so much that the Liberal Democrats are now in second place in many more Labour-held seats than in Conservative-held ones.

This is not good news for those in the party who advocate a move to the right to attract votes from those who hitherto have voted Conservative. Aside from problems caused by the quirks of the British electoral system, there are also philosophical reasons why a move to the right is not advisable.

Vince Cable talks of the potential for attracting 'disillusioned and liberal-minded Conservatives' but most of these people left the Tory Party long ago. Those that remain in the party do so for essentially tribal reasons and are therefore not likely to be amenable to overtures from the Liberal Democrats. Though we criticise tribalism in our party, it is worth noting that, without the tribal loyalty of our core, non-conformist vote in the 1950s, we would have been finished as a political force long ago.

While some will argue with the thesis that the Conservative vote cannot further be reduced, is it really likely that a liberal party would be the beneficiary? As successive polls have indicated, many right-leaning voters have fears about immigration, asylum and Europe that cannot be assuaged by the Liberal Democrats.

Conversely, the Liberal Democrats are well-placed to respond to concerns over the creeping privatisation of large parts of the public sector and the threat to our civil liberties through draconian 'security legislation'.

I started this article with a confession. Perhaps those on the right of the party should be equally candid. They are as entitled as anyone else to participate in the debate about the future direction of the party, but should not cloak their philosophical objectives in so-called electoral realism.

Andy White is a Liberal Democrat studying in Northern Ireland

BOMBS AWAY

The Liberal Democrats' success with their anti-war stance over Iraq should flow into defence policy under a parliamentary generation untainted by the Cold War, says Donnachadh McCarthy

Champagne and tears. Bizarrely, those were the two main thoughts that filled my mind as I spent the day at the Peace Memorial Park and Centre in Hiroshima. As I stared at the preserved charred buildings and the pictures of the unspeakable injuries and excruciating deaths suffered by the civilian inhabitants, the image that I could not shake from my head was of Ming Campbell and his colleagues breaking open the champagne bottles in the Lib Dem conference bar to celebrate the defeat of our modest partial nuclear disarmament amendment to the Liberal Democrat defence paper at the 2002 conference. Having succeeded in persuading conference to back the principle of leading by example on nuclear disarmament in the 2000 Globalisation Paper, the battle was always going to be over what that meant in practical terms in the subsequent defence paper.

Radicals proposed Britain should lead internationally by calling a disarmament conference of the nuclear powers and demonstrate our commitment to the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty (NNPT) by reducing the number of cities simultaneously destroyable by our current nuclear bomb system Trident to that destroyable by Polaris at the end of the Cold War. The leading members of the foreign affairs team were determined not only to block such a modest liberal proposal but also to delete all the advances achieved in the globalisation paper two years earlier.

Despite the fact that our proposal would have left the UK with enough nuclear bombs to destroy all the major Iraqi cities four times over, they used Iraq as an argument as to why we should retain the fourfold post Cold-War increase in the destructiveness of our submarine nuclear arsenal. We advocated that the party should take a clear line to support the UK's commitment to the NPT and so rule out support for a Trident successor, which would be a direct breach of the treaty. The then foreign affairs team again refused to countenance such a commitment and instead successfully advocated that no line should be taken, a cowardly stance sadly replicated in the 2005 general election manifesto. By a strange coincidence, the morning I sat down to write this, the front-page headlines in the Independent said that Tony Blair had already secretly committed the UK to build a Trident successor. This news emerged on the same day that the five-year review of the NNPT started in New York. But even worse, both the US and the UK have indicated their intention to develop a new category of 'tactical' nuclear weapons, which could be used on the battlefield as though conventional weapons. As it is inevitable that it will only be a matter of time before such evil weapons are added to the terrorist's arsenal, why develop them?

The great tragedy is that the current generation of politicians, and in this I include the Liberal Democrat leadership, is squandering the extraordinary opportunity for genuine disarmament provided by the end of the Cold War. By failing to have the intellectual flexibility to deal with a post-Cold War scenario, they condemn our planet to continue to live on a nuclear knife-edge. So where should we go from here? Following a general election campaign where our party relatively successfully highlighted our opposition to the dishonest and illegal invasion of Iraq, it is clear we now need to develop a wider radical Liberal programme for international relations. This programme would set out an international agenda while embracing traditional defence forces, but would emphasise investment in conflict avoidance and peace making. It would advocate an EU foreign relations policy that emphasised international development, poverty alleviation and environmental protection, instead of the enormously destructive US approach of global military hegemony. It is time for a new progressive liberal generation to take over responsibility for our defence and foreign policy from the Cold War generation. There is a new global reality in which the UK must provide a moral leadership rather than one of supine support for America's neo-conservatives.

The newly elected parliament will see decisions taken on nuclear rearmament and US siting of its missile defence systems in the UK.

The extraordinary rekindling of the traditional liberal opposition to illegal and pre-emptive wars was demonstrated in the February 2003 Peace March, the general election swing and the membership that has been inspired, and now needs to be harnessed to ensure that that liberal spirit infuses all of our defence policies. Unfortunately, our foreign affairs team in the last parliament was (in blatant contradiction to adopted party policy) bizarrely urging that Europe must radically increase its defence spending (currently running at about $160bn annually), not to defend us from a perceived military threat but to increase our influence in Washington. This is clearly madness in a world where the major threat to future UK security comes not from any enemy on our borders but from global warming and Third World poverty.

Thus the crucial question now is whether Liberal Democrat MPs like Alistair Carmichael, Jenny Willott, Norman Baker, Susan Kramer or Sarah Teather will take this up in the new parliament.

Donnachadh McCarthy was deputy chair of the Liberal Democrat Federal Executive 2002-2004.

INDIVISIBLE FREEDOM

Israelis and Palestinians cannot gain their freedom at the expense of the other, says Vivienne Jackson, who has monitored the treatment of one West Bank village

I've just returned from three months working in a tiny rural village in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. I'm Jewish and know Israel fairly well from countless summers spent there over my formative years.

Israel-Palestine is a lesson in what can go wrong when different communities are taught to see their freedoms as a zero-sum game; when "your freedom means my oppression". This notion has underpinned Israeli government policy for many years.

In the lands seized by military force by Israel in 1967, non-Jewish denizens can now expect restriction of freedom of movement through the vile 'separation barrier' and checkpoints into and across the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

Also typical are constant infringements of the right to life, family life, and habeas corpus, through military incursions, house demolitions, arbitrary shootings and arrests. The right to a decent living is denied through economic suffocation, plus usurpation of key resources such as water and land.

But the irony of Israel-Palestine is that the possibility of a life of liberty for almost all – Palestinians and Israeli Jews – is diminished as a result of both the occupation and the unhealthy lack of rights that Israeli Palestinians experience within Israel. This is more like an end game than a zero-sum game.

My village, and its relation to Israel, displays how the lives of all in Israel-Palestine are constantly tinged with tragedy and distortion thanks to the policies of successive Israeli governments.

Yanoun is situated in the east of the Occupied Territories, just beside the Jordan valley. It's one of the smallest villages in Palestine, with around 100 inhabitants. Yanoun is ravishingly beautiful, with rolling hills, ancient olive trees, plenty of goats and sheep, and a junior school with 25-odd pupils. People are a mixture of traditional and modern. Elderly people will pray in the same room while their children watch pop music on television.

But Yanoun's serene beauty may have been its undoing. On approaching Upper Yanoun village from the valley floor, if you look closely behind the old stone buildings nestled on the bluff of the mountain, you can see modern constructions made of metal and corrugated iron. These belong to an extremist Israeli Jewish settlement, called Itamar.

Armed with the conviction that God has given them the right to move onto land described in the Old Testament, settlers have erected an outpost of caravans, farming buildings, and watchtowers. From time to time, this sect-like group comes into Yanoun with guns, threatening and sometimes physically attacking the villagers.

In international law, according to the Geneva Convention, there are two very important rules covering the way that occupying governments should behave. First, you are not meant to build on occupied or disputed land while its fate is being resolved. Second, the welfare of civilians is your responsibility. You have to make sure no harm comes to them as a result of occupation.

And this just isn't happening in the West Bank, as I saw in Yanoun. Because extremists have been allowed to set up home in the territories and act with impunity, the villagers live in fear. I can provide a small menu of some of the spiteful indignities suffered by Yanoun residents.

Abu Najah, the oldest resident in the village, is a shepherd. He was set upon by settlers and blinded. He is now unable to work. The setters have entered people's homes with guns, verbally threatening them. They have mutilated and killed sheep belonging to the villagers. The settlers have seized control of some of the villagers' fields; they can no longer farm them.

In the past, the settlers have destroyed water tanks as well as the original electricity supply. The settlers shine searchlights over the village so Yanoun is constantly bathed in light, night and day. It's awful to feel as if you are constantly watched. I wondered if the settlers knew my face, knew what I looked like. I wondered if they knew the faces of the village children.

In 2002, the situation got so bad that the mayor decided the villagers should evacuate. In a strange way, this is how I ended up in Yanoun, because in 2002 Israeli and other activists committed to peace and justice decided they would return with the traumatised villagers to Yanoun so they could reclaim their homes. And ever since then, there has been an Israeli and/or international presence in the village; people who can witness what goes on, who can prompt the Israeli army into carrying out some of its responsibilities as an occupying power.

And this brings us back to duty number two. Not only is it unjust to allow people to build on other people's land and to threaten them, but the Israeli government should be protecting Yanoun properly. It sometimes took hours for the army to arrive to protect the villagers when they called for help. The promised protection of an army presence during the olive harvest – the main source of income for the villagers – was patchily provided.

After the armed settlers had visited Yanoun during the time that I lived there, I accompanied Yanoun's mayor to Ariel police station, as I speak a little Hebrew. Ariel is a huge Jewish city in the occupied territories, and here I truly experienced the huge difficulties faced by occupied Palestinians trying to access justice.

When you go to a police station to make a statement, ideally one expects to be taken seriously. Yanoun's mayor looks like a Palestinian farmer. Even though he was wearing his smartest clothes he was unmistakably not an Israeli. And to my disgust, the policemen teased him. They played with his clothes, they teased him in Hebrew, which I understood, but he didn't.

The man that took his statement was okay, said the mayor, treating him decently. But what I saw of these other police officers worried me greatly. How dare someone touch him as if he was a toy? What faith could the mayor have that his problem will be dealt with, at all?

My most disturbing experience occurred with Layla and her family. Her husband Khaled had been taken to prison – put into 'administrative detention'. This means that not only was Layla not told what her husband had been accused of, her husband was not been told either. And there are more than 900 Palestinians in this position, according to B'Tselem, the pioneering Israeli human rights organisation concerned with upholding rights in the Occupied Territories.

Layla has six children. She had sold the family sheep to survive while her husband was locked away. She had to travel through a checkpoint within the West Bank to get to Nablus to get financial help – a wait of four hours each way, some days with a baby in her arms. The squalor that the family lived in, shorn of their provider, was distressing.

Many in the west empathise deeply with the families in Israel who have lost loved ones in suicide bomb atrocities. Human rights abuses committed by Palestinians are often portrayed in our media as the oriental irrationalities of undeveloped agitators, who do not understand freedom.

We in the UK can imagine the impact of the suicide bomb on the lives of Israelis; western, modern, apparently living with elections and the rule of law. Our lives are more like their lives. So the kinds of restrictions that we see imposed on Palestinians in the media – often restrictions on freedom of movement – are portrayed by the Israeli government as proportionate to this threat.

But the human rights abuses to which Palestinians living in the Occupied Territories are subjected cannot be reasonably linked to Israeli security conditions, or an Israeli 'right to life'. The terrible living conditions and brutal military conditions to which I saw many Palestinians subjected, the flippant racism and discrimination in the Occupied Territories could not be connected in any sensible or causative way to the prevention of suicide bombs.

And the human rights abuses that those who do not live in the Occupied Territories suffer cannot be linked to Israeli security conditions.

Israelis pay a terrible price for the occupation. They live in constant fear that their children will die in the army. Israel is a militarised society through and through. The psychological impact of the army is to be brutalised; many Israelis have had to commit terrible acts that go against their public culture. To challenge the methods of the army and the occupation is seen as strange, unpatriotic, effete and unworthy. People spit at the Women in Black who stand each Friday in Jerusalem, silently protesting against the occupation.

What of the rights of poorer Israelis? There are many poor Jewish and Palestinian people today within Israel. Vast sums of money are being spent on the occupation and on protecting settlers. Unemployment is high. Wouldn't it be better to broker a fairer economic deal for ordinary people by withdrawing from the territories? Many Israeli Jews ironically move to there not for ideological reasons but because the Israeli government gives them tax breaks to do so.

What of the rights of Israelis to know what is done in their name? As I shuttled back and forward between Yanoun and Tel Aviv, where my friends live, there was genuine shock as I described the violent entry of settlers into Yanoun. "This is terrible. I've never heard of this before," said my Israeli friend Gal. As with asylum in the UK, there is incredulity amongst Israelis that terrible discrimination can happen under noses.

And freedom of movement affects Israelis as well. The right to befriend other communities than your own certainly isn't written into any human rights charter, but it's clear that Israelis and Palestinians both suffer diminished existences from their enforced separation. Israelis often believe they will be attacked if they enter the occupied territories. They are banned in theory from entering them.

Tel Aviv is only 40 minutes by car from Yanoun. It might as well be light years away. With institutional, physical and ideological separation, it's no wonder that some Israelis have racist ideas about Palestinians, and vice versa. It's an uphill struggle for Jews and Arabs to meet, especially across the borders of the occupation. This is key for each to see one another as human beings with equal value. Brave activists from the joint Jewish-Arab movement Ta-ayush who cross from Israel into the Occupied Territories prove regularly that Jews and Arabs can be friends.

What of the rights of Palestinians living within Israeli borders, often known as 'Israeli Arabs'? Some Palestinian Israelis live in 'unrecognised villages', where public funds are denied to Arabic-speaking communities for basic civic amenities on the spurious excuse that, according to official town planning, these towns don't exist.

The Israeli government is set on promoting Jewish population growth at the expense of Arab communities, as Ariel Sharon has said explicitly. Many Palestinians have claim to land from which they were forced out or fled from in 1947. Palestinians in Israel go to the least well performing schools, get the worst jobs, live largely separate lives from Israelis, and are treated with great suspicion by most Israelis. If the occupation does end, there will be more work to do to ensure that Israeli Palestinian rights are upheld.

Without a shadow of a doubt, the most important step forward for freedom in Israel-Palestine would be the ending of the illegal occupation. But a culture shift in favour of rights has to take place in Israel too. Those with societal – if not political – power in Israel must come to realise that their freedoms are absolutely dependent on the freedoms of others.

The notion that Palestinian and Israeli Jewish freedom can only be realised at the expense of one another must be overthrown.

Vivienne Jackson went to the Occupied Territories with Ecumenical Accompaniment in Palestine. www.eappi.org

LIBERALS AND OSCAR

Stewart Rayment takes a walk on the Wilde side through Jonathan Fryer's new biography

Aubrey Beardsley regarded Oscar Wilde as predatory; he was probably correct, and Jonathan Fryer is upfront on the matter. Fryer has been honing his work on Oscar over a number of tomes – on Gide and Wilde, and Robbie Ross, coming to fruition in his latest volume simply titled *Wilde*.

He has produced the best short work on Wilde currently on the market, and there have been quite a few in the wake of the centenary of his death five years ago. Hitchens's *The Green Carnation* gave us the essence of the man in 1894, but this predates the heroic period of Wilde's life.

The detail of Wilde's life is well known and there is probably little to add, but Fryer spells this out with less ambiguity than we have been accustomed to. We are learning more of Wilde's Liberal connections – indeed, Jonathan has written of them in Liberator previously. There is an undercurrent of embarrassment in respect of this. Wilde, and particularly Robbie Ross, his seducer and literary executive, were familiar with the Asquiths and other leading Liberal families.

But it was Henry Labouchere's amendment to an Act, generally directed at protecting young girls from prostitution, that sent Wilde to prison. Labouchere tabled a late night amendment intended to extend the scope to boys, but the drafting was sufficiently loose to allow its application to any homosexual act. A supporter of Wilde, with many homosexual friends, not least Lou Lou Harcourt, it is improbable that Labouchere could have intended such an outcome. The embarrassment grows. Close to a general election, and under pressure from the Tories, the Liberal cabinet felt unable to intervene in the Wilde trials. Here we come to a point of contention. I remain unconvinced about the rumoured homosexuality of Lord Rosebery. Robert Rhodes James, Rosebery's biographer, found no evidence of it, and felt that it was unlikely in the light of contrary facts.

Compromising documents could indeed have been destroyed; Rosebery's first major biographer was his son, Lord Crewe. However, the opening lines of Rosebery's biography of Sir Robert Peel show him pacing up and down late at night in the room of a cabinet colleague and finally saying 'Never destroy a letter'. When I challenged Jonathan on this matter after the publication of *Andre and Oscar*, he admitted that all there is was rumour.

Queensberry is generally regarded as unstable, High Toryism apart. Ellmann puts in something of a good word for the 9th Marquess, motivated as a father worried for his sons (yet he even frowned on the undoubted heterosexual union of his third son with a clergyman's daughter as beneath him). There can be no doubt of Bosie's homosexuality, but what of Drumlanrig? Drumlanrig was private secretary to Lord Rosebery as Foreign Minister. Queensberry thought Rosebery a homosexual and corrupter of his son and heir. The incident which sparks the rumour is that, in 1893, the Marquess followed Rosebery to Bad Homberg and threatened him with a dog whip. The Prince of Wales intervened.

Fryer does pad out the story a bit. He alludes to Cabinet discussions about the Wilde trial and this matter, whether formal or informal. He later says that the Rosebery government was unable to intervene for reasons of exposure and exploitation by the Tories in a coming general election. I would like to see more detail. We lack modern biographies of Labouchere and the Harcourts among many such players. Is there more to be found in any surviving papers?

Hoare's book, *Oscar Wilde's Last Stand*, tells how this saga continued to haunt Liberals. It involves another sometime Liberal MP, Noel Pemberton Billing, who ended his days as a proto-fascist. The other main player is Maud Allan, whose private production of Wilde's *Salome* prompted scandal. Allan sued Billing for libel, possibly at the behest of Lloyd George, possibly with keeping the Asquith's at bay, in a darker period of World War One. A central allegation was that the Germans kept a black book of the known perversions of members of the British establishment and that fear of exposure prevented those persons from waging the war effectively. Bosie, now very much his father's son, weighs in with Billing and Robbie Ross and the Asquiths - notably Margot, are in the Allan camp.

I am not totally convinced by the book, which seems of the 'take three pieces of information, string them together and make a story' mode. It did, however, prompt me to read Fryer's book on Robbie Ross. Jonathan deals with this matter in three or four pages. Somebody reading this knows that they owe me a review…

Ross was more immediately connected with Liberals than Wilde and moved in Margot Asquith's circle. We owe much to him for keeping cheap editions of Wilde's works in print. One might argue that the strength of the work would prevail, but who now reads Pinero or Maeterlinck, or most of Shaw for that matter? Ross was a minor literary figure and Fryer has served him well in this biography. It is a specialist read, whereas *Wilde*…is still being talked about.

Wilde by Jonathan Fryer; Haus 2005, £9.99
Robbie Ross, Oscar Wilde's True Love by Jonathan Fryer; Constable 2000, £18.99.
Oscar Wilde's Last Stand by Philip Hoare; Arcade 1997.

Stewart Rayment is a member of the Liberator Collective

LETTERS

ALPHA MINUS

Dear Liberator,

On reading Attack of the Willy Wavers (Liberator 301), I could not help feeling a sense of déjà vu, as there was a similar period in the mid-1980s when there was a perceived prospect of rapid expansion and power.

David Steel told the 1981 assembly to "prepare for power". There was an influx of people attracted by the prospect of power, particularly in the SDP including some who were motivated by opportunism and do not share the ideals of most Liberator readers. Rapid expansion also has the effect of drawing in other types of people who end up being elected to positions beyond their capabilities.

However instead of warning of the problems of being on the edge of power, Simon Titley indulges in a half-baked application of the observations of animal psychologists such as Konrad Lorenz by referring to the Alpha Male.

If he is referring to would-be leaders who adopt a charismatic approach, history shows that they are rarely successful under normal circumstances.

Britain has little love of such leaders, particular those who are impatient for power or give that impression. The classic example was Oswald Mosley, who began by changing parties but rapidly grew impatient and attempted to form a centrist new party, which he soon gave up and attempted to emulate Hitler and Mussolini.

More recently, David Owen ended up with his own band of dwindling supporters and Robert Kilroy-Silk, who had he been prepared to wait a while could well have become leader of UKIP, is likely to go the same way.

The exceptions when charismatic leadership occurred were usually in a crisis, as with Churchill and Lloyd George. Both however were prepared to court short-term unpopularity. When the crisis was over, Churchill lost to the less charismatic but highly competent Clement Attlee.

The biggest danger with the prospect of power is impatience, with tactical manoeuvring for perceived short-term gain taking precedence over long-term strategic advance, which may be slower but tends to be more enduring.

That was the biggest mistake of the mid-1980s and not the attributes of Dr Owen.

Simon Titley also shows sexist tendencies by suggesting that it is a male phenomenon. Nature also has an alpha queen in some animal colonies.

Remember the Thatcher era? How many women held prominent positions in Thatcher's cabinet for any length of time?

He is right to warn us of the potential influx of opportunists that success will bring but the Alpha Male should be the last thing to worry about. They invariably hoist themselves on their own petard.

Andrew Hudson
Leyton

ENRICHED FROM ABROAD

Dear Liberator,

I read with interest Patriot Games (Liberator 301) and was struck once again that everyone seems to overlook one of the major success of the 'British' nation.

This green and pleasant land has been long admired from afar by the 'hordes' of the continent. Invaders have raided, settled and then been usurped by their successors. Each culture has left its own distinct pattern that has been woven into the psyche of our nation, each time making the nation stronger rather than diluting it as has been suggested by several 'right' thinking people.

The first Celts settled (reasonably peacefully) the British Isles in 400 BC and managed to survive reasonably well until the Romans turned up. Another 300 years of stability followed, but once the Roman Empire collapsed the real invasions began. Over the next 1,000 years, 'Britain' was invaded by the Jutes and Angles (Denmark), Saxons (Germany), Scotti (Ireland), Vikings (Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland), Danes (Denmark) and Normans (France).

Through the medieval period, Britain became a 'safe haven' for radical thought and so there was an influx of Jews, Huguenots and other minority groups. This melting pot strengthened the British and laid the foundation for the expansion of Empire.

Along the way, we've enslaved many more cultures and exploited them harshly, but in doing so we absorbed much that benefits our nation. The migrations of recent years from Europe, Africa, West Indies, the Middle East and the Orient have been defining moments in our history.

Chicken Tikka Masala is the nation's favourite dish and the majority of our music industry is founded on black music.

It has not all been plain sailing and there is much that we, as a nation, should atone for, but when people say that we should impose a limit on immigration or asylum, the simple answer is, don't be so stupid, that's what made Britain so Great.

James Blessing
Salford

REVIEWS

Education for Changing Unions by Bev Burke and others Between the Lines 2005 £12.95

This is not a book for recreational reading; it is a workbook aimed at trade union educators and officials. The authors are Canadian and the book was first published in Canada in 2002. The title may be misleading in that the book is not written by the Canadian equivalent of New Labour modernisers who intend to reform trade unions to meekly accept the changes that are being forced on workforces through outsourcing and globalisation.

The aim is to enable trade unions to adapt to these forces and to combat their effects through improving union organisation. The authors also aim to ensure that unions are representative of their membership through equality through participation and democracy.

Canada, it should be emphasised, is not a smaller version of the United States where union membership has shown a long-term decline. Canada is a highly unionised country that still has a healthy public sector and is in many ways similar to the Scandinavian world.

Some of the terminology may be unfamiliar to the UK readers. 'Aboriginal people' denotes members of the first nation tribes and Inuit people. The spelling is American. 'Maquila' denotes sweatshops established immediately south of the US/Mexico border to exploit cheap labour. The term 'equity' is used for equality and 'people of colour' is an import from the United States to denote people on the receiving end of colour-based racism.

The book however deals with techniques rather than issues, and the methods can be applied in most countries. Some are used increasingly by modern management, such as groups and flip charts. The authors wherever possible try to draw on the experience of people they are teaching during their sessions, one example being the learning spiral, which starts with experience.

They attempt to address prejudicial attitudes in their courses by avoiding outright confrontation and asking the person where they obtained their opinions on issues such as alleged welfare abuse. This technique is likely to be more effective than trying to put the person down as being prejudiced.

At the end, they deal with evaluation and strategic planning, acknowledging that there may be union officials who do not want an open democratic structure and who may feel threatened. Although the book urges inclusivity in pictures in handouts, there seems to be a predominance of women in the photographs, particularly from the Asia Pacific Women's Workshop.

The techniques could be used in other forms of training, including within the party, and there is an appendix containing examples. The authors suggest that union members who are loath to sit on committees, run for office and want a less political role might agree to become lay educators. In Britain, there are union learning reps, whose role is broader than merely education in union activities. This is a role that Liberals might like to take on as it involves education in a broader sense.

Andrew Hudson

State of Fear by Michael Crichton Harper Collins 2004 £17.99

Another Michael Crichton story using the 'man bites dog' approach as in Disclosure, only this time there is a series of charts and footnotes that would do credit to a work of non-fiction.

Unlike his previous stories, it was some way into the book before the plot really began to take off. The author uses a lawyer attempting to prepare a lawsuit to bring in the climate data that is inconclusive and often contradicts global warming. As the plot unfolds, several environmental organisations begin to fear that the data may not back their claims and plan to trigger some catastrophic events in order to convince people of the threat.

Meanwhile, a wealthy benefactor who is about to withdraw his support for the organisations goes missing. There is a race against time to prevent the plotters.

There is a substantial appendix in which Crichton outlines his views, which differ from those in the story in that he acknowledges that a small increase in global temperature may be taking place but, although human activity might be having an effect, it may be part of a natural process. The most recent ice age consisted of four major glacial phases but there were interglacial periods in which there were hippopotamuses in the River Thames.

Crichton also warns of the politicisation of science, a message that

could be applied to both the green democrats and the Association of Liberal Democrat Engineers and Scientists.

The book gets the reader to examine just where they are forming their opinions by examining the climatic evidence critically. Also, it raises questions as to what is natural, with one character pointing out that fields are artificial and that many areas that are farmland were once covered in forests.

He also raises the issue of how to react when the evidence starts to conflict with strongly held opinions.

A recent article in Scientific American, which isn't in the bibliography, suggested that the introduction of farming thousands of years ago averted a glaciation and caused temperatures to rise. It should not be dismissed as an anti green dirge.

Andrew Hudson

Russia, war, peace & diplomacy by Ljubica Erickson and Mark Erickson (eds) Weidenfeld & Nicholson 2004 £25.00

"The only way to succeed in academia, my dear, is to be a very, very good academic indeed." So said John Erickson, who died three years ago, and this collection of essays in his honour is testimony that he did succeed.

Erickson was more than an academic however, advising NATO and US policy makers; he was the west's expert on the Russian military. *The Soviet High Command 1918-1941* of 1962 remains the standard work on the early years of the Red Army. Perhaps better known, *The Road to Stalingrad* followed in 1975 and *The Road to Berlin* in 1982.

Esteemed by the Soviets, as a birthday treat he was taken into the bowels of the Kremlin and allowed to handle Hitler's jawbone. As Sir Michael Howard recalls in the foreword, he once asked a Russian delegate what proportion of the Soviet budget was allocated to military affairs. "It's no good asking us," came the reply. "We don't know anything about it. The only person who does is your Professor Erickson, and we go to him if there is anything we really want to know."

But enough of eulogy. As one would expect, there is a considerable amount about the battle of Stalingrad in these essays; despite some opening of Russian archives, still much less known in the west. Reina Pennington notably writes of the combat role of women in the Red Army – long before it became controversial in the west. Erickson, himself a soldier, would often salute a woman officer out of sheer admiration for the medals she wore. Yet this role is neglected in Russia as well as the west.

David Glantz provides a corrective to the standard western view of the war on the eastern front (the Wehrmacht rolls in, it's checked at Leningrad, Moscow, mostly by the winter, then there is Stalingrad and the Red Army rolls all the way the Berlin, with a minor blip to let the Poles get massacred in Warsaw, though if you're lucky someone may mention Kursk).

He outlines the numerous other battles of the Red Army, some of them deliberately forgotten by the Russians as they failed to stem the German advance. Although the war for us ends in 1945, the Russians were still fighting partisan groups in Ukraine and elsewhere into the mid-1950s and the last such Latvian on the loose was shot as late as 1972.

Anthony Beevor's writing on Stalingrad and *Rattenkrieg* points out how relentless German bombing created the ideal environment for Russian defenders. Doesn't this have an echo in Iraq today?

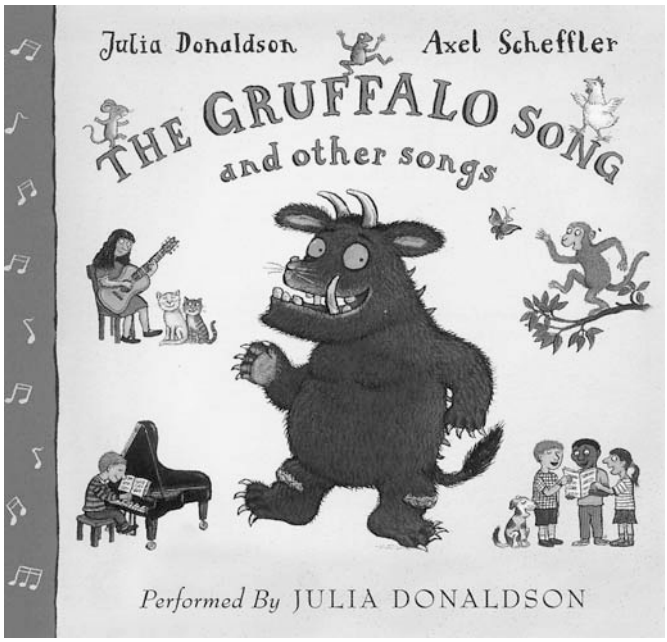
Sergei Kudryashov makes some interesting points on the Travniki Guards (who undertook police work, often in concentration camps, for the Nazis). He finds the testimonies taken by the KGB not under the duress one might suspect – they didn't have time to torture small fry.

James Cant brings us closer to home with his piece on the SS-20 missile, which perhaps those of us in the peace camp should have been more concerned about. One would really like to know how these tensions are played out in the current Russian military.

Sally N Cummings's piece – *The New Central Asia: challenges for the region* dates rapidly as revolutions of one colour or another take forward the incomplete liberation process in the former Soviet empire, but it provides a general background, which most of us will freely admit is lacking. The Akayev regime collapsed in Kyrgyzstan in March, but the forthcoming elections look as if they'll heighten north-south divides within the country.

At some point (a la Kosovo), the problems of Stalinist borders will have to be visited. Perhaps Liberal International should look at these issues, having recently held a forum on the Caucasus region (see next issue of *interLib*).

Stewart Rayment

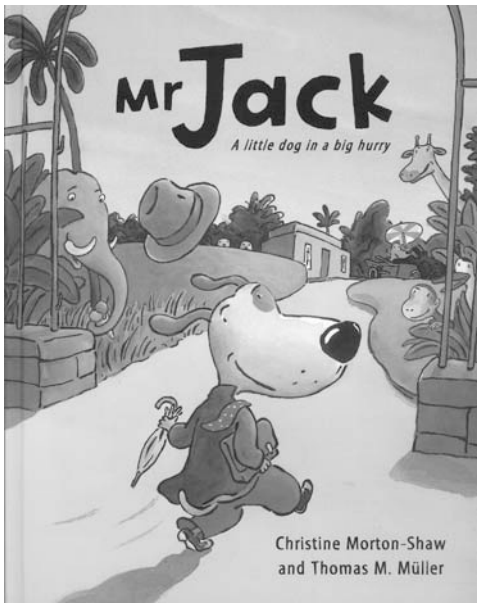


The Gruffalo Song and other songs by Julia Donaldson, illustrated by Alex Scheffler Macmillan 2005 £12.99

Hardly has the dust settled on *The Gruffalo's Child* when the beast wakes up and bursts into song (literally, almost, since Julia Donaldson sings along on the CD that comes with the book).

Alas, *Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Mouse* is not here – probably because of copyright problems with Disney. That mouse seems to pop up everywhere – even down on *Muddle Farm*, and is clearly Scheffler's signature. Julia Donaldson herself appears strumming a guitar on the cover, with her two cats.

Stewart Rayment



Mr Jack a little dog in a big hurry by Christine Morton-Shaw and Thomas M Müller Macmillan 2005 £9.99

Mr Jack has a terrific retro feel about it, except the sun didn't shine so brightly in those days – terrific colour. This little dog is going to be big, hurry or not!

Stewart Rayment

if... by Mark Sinker BFI Publishing 2004 £8.99

BFI Film Classics, the British Film Institute's series of short monographs on individual films, is a great idea. The quality varies – reading A. L. Kennedy on *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* is like watching the movie with a woman in a large floral hat plonked in the seat in front of you – but with a scene-by-scene study of the film, plenty of stills and a discussion of its sources and wider significance, Mark Sinker's study of *if....* provides all you could ask.

When the film came out in 1968, it was thought daringly avant-garde. Today it looks more like the last flowering of the Auden, Isherwood and Spender tradition from the 1930s. To them, as to the film's director Lindsay Anderson, a British public school was at once a totalitarian state in miniature and a symbol of the nation.

Alan Bennett's play *Forty Years On* was first seen in 1968 too. Bennett also used a school to symbolise Britain, but he saw that the traditional public school was passing and wanted to explore its attractive side as well as its many absurdities. Today his play's humour and elegiac tone seem a saner reaction to that world than Anderson's self-conscious cinematic and political radicalism.

Jonathan Calder

The City by the Pool by Michael J Jones et al Oxbow Books 2003 £29.95

With the obvious exception of London, probably no British city's history has been documented as comprehensively as Lincoln's. In part, this is the product of Sir Francis Hill's multiple-volume history published some fifty years ago. More recently, it is due to the work of local archaeologists.

This book is a pioneering attempt to draw together archaeological evidence and analysis from pre-history to the Second World War, not only to present a coherent history of the city but also to provide a more rational basis for future archaeological work. It is part of English Heritage's efforts to generate coverage of such assessments nationally.

As such, this assessment provides a valuable model for local councils in other parts of the country struggling with the responsibility for managing the archaeology of their areas.

With limited resources, where do you send your archaeologists and their trowels? How do you categorise their findings? Are you assisting future generations by carrying out archaeological surveys of buildings that are about to be demolished?

As far as Lincoln is concerned, the most intriguing conclusion of this study is the convincing (but, as yet, purely circumstantial) evidence that Lincoln was an important ritual site in the Iron Age. Unearthing hard evidence must now be a priority.

Simon Titley

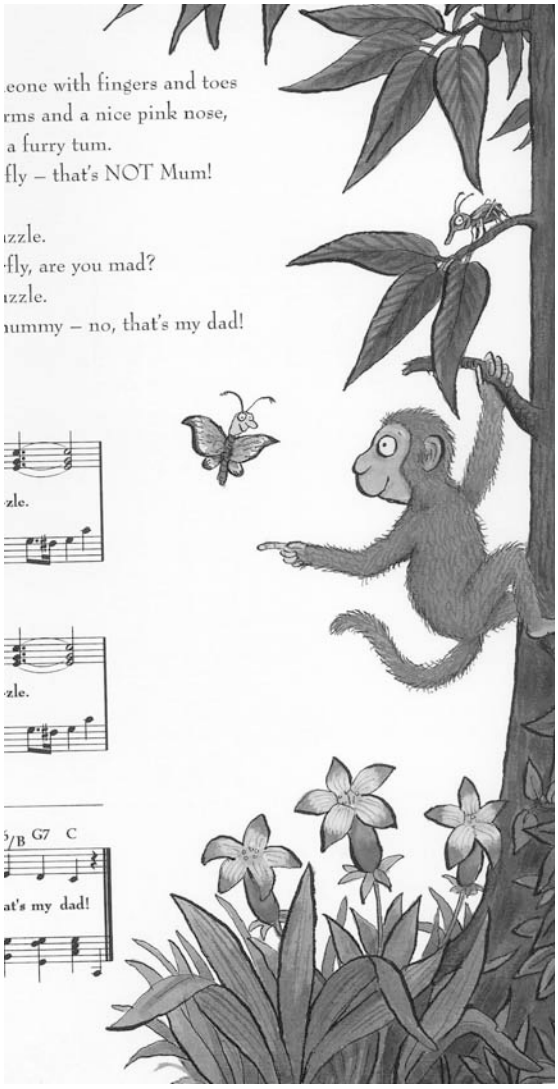
Big Bang Localism by Simon Jenkins Policy Exchange 2004 £10

One of the major revisions the Liberal Democrats must make to their policy following the general election is to overhaul their proposals for English devolution. The heavy defeat in the recent referendum on the proposed devolution in the north-east ought to have made it clear that English regionalism is now dead in the water.

What is the alternative? Columnist Simon Jenkins suggests a revolutionary and drastic devolution of power back to our traditional cities and counties.

Jenkins is well-known as a libertarian Tory and he was a fierce critic of the Thatcher and Major governments' 'nationalisation' of Britain's public sector. He remains scathing of both the Tories' and New Labour's centralising tendencies.

You may not agree with all of Jenkins's suggestions for revitalising local government, but his book is packed with stimulating ideas.



Essentially, Jenkins sees the county as the ideal repository of local power. He would scrap Whitehall's 'regions', quangos and assorted targets. He suggests replacing the NHS with a county-based health service. He advocates a variety of local taxes and that central cash be block grant and not ring-fenced.

There is the slight problem for Liberal Democrats in that the Tories, following this year's elections, now control 24 out of 37 English counties. We'll just have to learn how to win more county council elections, won't we? Devolution can take root only in territories that have popular recognition, which is why the north-east referendum was lost. Outside a few big cities, counties are the units to which most English people retain affinity.

Jenkins clearly admires the way in which many continental European countries have devolved power. Just as Denmark devolved in 1970 and France in 1982, Jenkins calls for a 'big bang' in Britain rather than a gradualist approach to reform.

This short book is thoroughly recommended and compulsory reading for any Liberal interested in rescuing our democracy.

Simon Titley

Machiavelli: a man misunderstood by Michael White Little Brown 2005 £16.99

Given the life and times of Big Mach, it is hard to go wrong with a story – after all, you have the backdrop of the Borgias, Medicis and Savoranola to add spice. This is a nice enough light read, fine for a general background, but lacks depth. Is Machiavelli still the demon of revenge tragedy? I'd have thought not. *The Prince* is still widely read – anyone entering politics should do so and hopefully, as good republicans, you will also read the *Discourses on the first ten books of Titus Livy*.

I'm not sure why White contrasts Machiavelli with Mencius and Plato. The two books mentioned do not portray an idealised state; they are commentaries on how different types of state, a monarchy and a republic, behave and what we can learn from that in so far as they ought to behave to meet their respective purposes. In this way they anticipate management theory rather than political philosophy. There is no substitute for studying these books at first hand.

Minor points – Lucretius wrote *De Rerum Natura*, not *De Natura Rerum*… an easy mistake translating it back, I suppose (*On The Nature of Things*). Of course Machiavelli wore black – that doesn't demonise him. Everybody apart from the very rich wore dark dull colours prior to the invention of aniline dyes in the mid-nineteenth century.

An enjoyable read, but don't count on passing an exam on it.

Stewart Rayment

A Good Woman Lion Studios 2004

Whilst we're on Wilde, no great political insights as we chart the torments of Scarlett Johansson and Mark Umbers (the Windermeres) when Helen Hunt (Mrs. Erlynne – men love it when she arrives, their wives, when she leaves) turns up in Amalfi in this remake of Oscar's *Lady Windermere's Fan* (*A Good Woman* was the original working title of the play). Mike Barker, the director, remains in period mode – be it the 1930s, having cut his teeth with TV costume dramas like *Lorna Doone* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

Supporting cast from the backbone of Brits in movies – Roger Hammond as Cecil, John Standing as Dumby and Tom Wilkinson as Tuppy. Wilkinson was Queensberry in *Wilde* and Dr. Chasuble in the 2002 *Importance of Being Earnest*, so he seems to be working through the oeuvre. These three, along with Milena Vukotic, the Contessa, provide a constant string of gossip and bon mots, many of which you'll miss the first time round. Buy it on DVD when available; meanwhile catch it at your local cinema.

Stewart Rayment

Lord Bonkers' Diary

Monday

Speaking in a purely personal capacity, I view the prospect of house arrest with equanimity – particularly if no one spills the beans about the secret passage that comes out in the cellar of the Bonkers Arms. I should devote myself to my library, translating manuscripts from the ancient tongue of Rutland, and perhaps mount an expedition to reach the fabled North Wing here at the Hall. As a boy, I was served by an ancient footman who told me that his grandfather had described a visit to it on his deathbed; I have always cherished the ambition of seeing it with my own eyes. However, we must lay our narrow interests aside when principle takes it turn at the crease. The New Party's legislation is an outrage and we must strain every sinew to fight it. If you should happen to come across a chap called Sedgemore, mark his words well: he is particularly Sound on the subject.

Tuesday

To Scotland to enjoy that blissful period after it stops raining for the winter and before the midges appear for the summer. Why, in a good year it can last as long as three days! On my way to Brig o'Dread, my Highland shooting box, I pause in the Borders to help in the campaign. The Boundary Commissioners have abolished Sir Archy Kirkwood – a decision, I forecast, they will live to regret – but our own Michael Moore is standing again. I have mentioned before that, with his great height and distinctive burr, he is believed by many to be the fruit of a dalliance between the rugger commentator Bill McLaren and a lock forward from the New Zealand ladies XV. Yet today I find him strangely changed: he sports a baseball cap and insists on showing his Oscar on every doorstep. When he tries to convince me that Osama Bin Laden is the brother-in-law of both President Bush and Prince Philip, I make my excuses and leave for Edinburgh Waverley.

Wednesday

I am worried about this modern enthusiasm for giving everyone a postal vote. We should not lightly discard the safeguards of the traditional polling station, as there we can be sure that every vote is cast in perfect secrecy – unless a Bonkers Patent Polling Booth Periscope is being employed, that is. Where postal voting is widespread, skulduggery on the part of our opponents is not slow to follow. When such dirty business is afoot, we would all do well to remember the sage counsel of my agent in '06: "If it votes Liberal, offer it a poster. If it doesn't, hit it with your orchard doughty."

Thursday

After a hard day's campaigning, I settle down to watch the results on the moving television. Why, I wonder, does the British Broadcasting Company still feel it necessary to employ David Dimbleby when it is so clearly time he was put out to graze? I know his father commentated upon every state occasion from the launch of the Queen Mary to the conception of Princess Anne, but for each of us there comes a time to return to the pavilion. I thrill to the gains we make, yet I am also sad to see the loss of several good Liberals. I feel sure the poet Housman had our defeats in Ludlow and Guildford in mind when he wrote: "With rue my heart is laden/For golden friends I had,/For many a rose-lipt maiden/And many a lightfoot lad." He may well have been thinking of Weston-super-Mare, Newbury and Leicester South when he went on to remark: "By brooks too broad for leaping/The lightfoot boys are laid;/The rose-lipt girls are sleeping/In fields where roses fade." As to our national campaign (in which I spent several days as Kennedy's rear gunner), am I alone in detecting a lack of vim, a shortage of brio and a distinct undersupply on the pizzazz front?

Friday

In the clear light of morning, as the sun rises over my spinney of rowen and horwood, I can view yesterday's events with a dispassionate eye. If they were not the triumph for which we yearned, nor yet were they a disaster. A deputation of bigwigs arrives from Cowley Street to ask me what the party should do next, and I prescribe a period of reflection. We should read the great Liberal philosophers of the Modern Age – Mill, Popper, Irving Berlin – and the Whig historians (I mention Thomas Babington Macaulay Culkin in particular). Later I hear from Scotland that the Liberal Democrats have held Gordon and the Scottish Nationalists have held Angus; one wonders if more cold baths and cross-country runs are not indicated. I also hear from the draughtier side of Hadrian's Wall that we have captured Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey, yet gained only one Member of Parliament for our pains. This hardly seems fair, and once again the case for electoral reform is strengthened.

Saturday

I ring Lembit Öpik to congratulate him on his result in Montgomery. We take the opportunity to discuss the strange career of Paul Marsden, who emulated my old friend Winston Churchill by ratting and then reratting. "What exactly did Marsden say when you first talked about his joining the Liberal Democrats?" I ask. "I think it was 'Take me to your leader'," the amiable Estonian replies. Suddenly it all makes sense: Marsden was an alien and did not properly understand our ways or our politics. (No doubt where he comes from it is the done thing to cross the floor and there are chaps with three heads and green tentacles doing it simply all the time). It is ironic, given Öpik's concern with objects coming from Outer Space, that he failed to spot that the former Member for Shrewsbury was one of them.

Sunday

It began as a barely imaginable dream and grew into a whispered rumour. We gather around the wireless this morning to hear Alvar Liddell announce that it has become a fact. Margaret Hodge is no longer the Minister for Children! Spontaneous Morris dancing breaks out on the village green and the Bonkers' Arms flows with champagne and porter – as well as Greaves & Smithson's Northern Bitter, of course. Parents unbar cellar doors and their pallid, ragged sons and daughters emerge blinking into the sunlight. From attics and priests holes they are rescued; from hollow trees and hidden caves. Some mothers and fathers, crying with joy and relief that at last the coast is clear, hammer on the doors of the Bonkers' Home for Well-Behaved Orphans. We pretend to be out.

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

www.bonkers.hall.btinternet.co.uk