liberator

In this issue

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COMMENTARY

VISION THING

It is not normally Liberator's place to urge people to be reasonable and restrained – two courses usually urged by those who want nothing done about any given issue.

However, the public conduct of too many senior Liberal Democrats has, since the general election, bordered on the irrational.

Some of them expected more than the 65-70 seats that appeared realistic on any reading of runes.

It is not a crime to have been optimistic and mistaken. However, to speak as though the general election were some major reversal for the party is simply not grounded in reality.

Charles Kennedy's gratuitous attack on the party conference was immensely damaging and risks setting all manner of damaging hares running in the media.

Opponents found plenty of things within the depths of Liberal Democrat policy papers with which they could mount embarrassing attacks – but none of these were anything to do with the conference, which had as usual merely rubber-stamped the policy papers put before it.

Meanwhile, there has been a concerted rubbishing of local income tax without anyone troubling themselves to investigate what effect it actually had on voters.

Then there have been calls for the party to increase its appeal to either Tory or Labour voters, without any evident recognition that doing one would involve a completely different set of policies to the other, neither of which might be very liberal.

Out in the real word, there are more than enough weighty issues for the Liberal Democrats to get their heads round. Assumptions about Europe are being turned upside down by the French and Dutch referendums; the pensions crisis looms large and gets no better; and house prices spiral ever upwards beyond the reach of most people.

Fortunately, there are signs that sanity is starting to prevail, in that the *Meeting the Challenge* policy review is seeking to proceed from the basis of what the party wishes to do, based on its values.

This ought, if followed through, to mean a process evolves that looks at what a Liberal Democrat government would want to accomplish, what policies it would need to do that, and how those would be used in political campaigning.

Taking this approach would mean that the party could finally get its policy and campaigning working together and in the right order around a coherent programme that is of Liberal Democrat inspiration, not concocted on the off chance it will appeal to supporters of other parties.

The Liberal Democrats cannot progress by forever chasing after temporarily disaffected supporters of other parties.

It's time for the "we'll have six policies that appeal to Tories, and half-a-dozen that appeal to Labour supporters" approach to end.

It is easy to be cynical about *Meeting the Challenge* but, for the present, it seems worth taking those involved at their word.

They are looking for ideas on what the party wants to achieve and where it wants to go – and fortunately do not appear greatly interested in riders of pet hobbyhorses or the inventors of instant paths to power who normally appear at these times.

Since it is quite likely that the both the party's economic liberal right wing, and its pale conservative right wing (and the two are different), will be taking part in this exercise, it is worth radicals doing the same.

LABOUR'S POLL TAX

The Holy Grail of politics is to be right and popular. Identity cards are shaping up to be just such an issue; they might even become Labour's poll tax.

Although initial opinion polls suggested they would be popular, each revelation about their cost drives down public support.

It does not take much imagination to see where this might lead – elderly people marched off to prison because they cannot afford, or refuse to pay, more than £100 for a card; enormous inconvenience to the public as people have to make appointments for iris scans; resentment of the police as innocent people are prosecuted for forgetting to carry their card or face unreasonable demands to produce it.

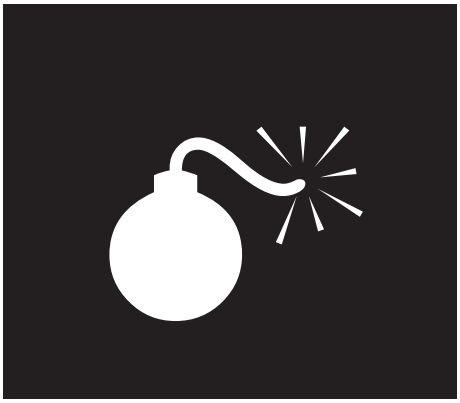
On top of that are the civil liberty arguments. Identity cards are supposed to help 'defend' Britain against terrorism.

But one of the things that makes Britain worth defending is that, at least until the advent of the Blair government, it has not been a police state in which people need to account to the authorities for going about their lawful business – and pay for the privilege.

Concern about privacy will grow as the use of electronic data on individuals increases. Concern about the government imposing a large cost and inconvenience on the public for something they do not want will arise whether the Liberal Democrats (or for that matter, the Tories) stoke it or not.

Keep a note of how each Labour MP votes on ID cards. Then, as public fury at this costly intrusion mounts, hang it round the neck of every one of them at the next election. No Labour MP who supports ID cards should benefit from Liberal Democrat tactical votes.

New Labour's trademark arrogance and authoritarianism have driven it promote ID cards. With luck, this policy could hasten its downfall.



RADICAL BULLETIN

PEASANTS' REVOLT

The Liberal Democrat parliamentary party astonished itself as much as anyone when it installed Chesterfield MP Paul Holmes as its chair, defeating incumbent Mathew Taylor by a whopping 36 votes to 23.

This was no accident; the coup had been carefully plotted with prominent Beveridge Group members in the lead. New MPs voted, but most felt it was not their place to rock the boat so soon, and the driving forces were all longer serving MPs.

Their motivation was to put a shot across the bows of leader Charles Kennedy, who a few days earlier had been formally re-elected as leader unopposed.

This shot was fired by a last-minute candidate – it might have been even worse for Kennedy had Harrogate MP Phil Willis stood as originally planned.

Both Willis and Bath MP Don Foster toyed with standing for chief whip. However, Kennedy did a deal with incumbent Andrew Stunell to stay on until another anticipated reshuffle before the Queen's Speech in November 2006, breaking the convention that the chief whip serves for a whole parliament.

Willis was furious at being dumped in the reshuffle, from both the education brief and the shadow cabinet, and was hardly placated by being told that this had happened by accident.

He planned then to stand for chair, but was persuaded not to by an offer from Kennedy to chair an inquiry into the management of the parliamentary party. Holmes, his chief canvasser, stepped into the breach and still won by a mile.

A combination of factors lay behind the discontent: the election campaign and result; Kennedy's perceived subsequent slide back into masterful inactivity; the shadow cabinet reshuffle; and a feeling that MPs were being excluded from key decisions taken by the coterie around Kennedy and his eminence grise Lord Razzall.

You read it here first. In Liberator 302, we predicted that, at 62 (prior to Patsy Calton's death), the parliamentary party was a peculiarly unmanageable size – too large to be run on the collegiate lines used before 1997 and too small to have the shadow cabinet and backbench split used by the Tories and Labour in opposition.

Enough MPs were fed up, and the unfortunate Taylor provided the immediate means of making this discontent known.

Taylor is close to Kennedy and was one of the first MPs to endorse him in the 1999 leadership contest. Some unfortunate hustings remarks to the effect that he resented being challenged did not win Taylor any friends.

The increased number of MPs has meant that many have felt the need for a parliamentary party chair to be a shop steward between them and the leadership.

Taylor had seen the job as that of being the party's no.4 public figure, behind the leader, deputy and president, and performed creditably in that role during the election. Few though could imagine him in the shop steward role.

Another significant consequence of the result may be the reinvigoration of the Beveridge Group, now that one of its most prominent members has pulled off such a triumph.

This was formed in 2001 to fight Mark Oaten's right-wing Peel Group from the left, but has since shown every sign of having become moribund, with a deafening silence during last autumn's *Orange Book* controversy.

The result suggests the economic liberal right around Vincent Cable and David Laws will not have things all their own way in the parliamentary party.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

What prompted the sudden flurry of headless-chicken behaviour just after the general election?

There was Lib Dem leader Charles Kennedy's inexplicable outburst against the party conference (Liberator 302), followed by hints that a 'year zero' would be declared for party policy, and a sustained public briefing against the local income tax policy.

The answer is that a good many people, who ought to have known better, had absurdly over-inflated ideas of how many gains the party would make in the general election.

Indeed, party president Simon Hughes was quoted on television saying that he had anticipated 27 gains. Even if he merely meant gross gains, that would still have been an assessment for which 'over optimistic' hardly does justice.

Just before the election, a group of MPs were having dinner and speculated on the spread of seats they thought the party would get.

Those that correctly guessed 50-65 were astonished to find that other MPs' lowest predictions were above their highest, with bets in the 75-90 range being common.

One MP, told that a helper predicted 60 seats, looked astounded and said, "but Kennedy and Rennard are confidently expecting 80-100, anything less would be regarded by the leadership as a huge failure".

Seen in that light, 62 seats looks poor, though seen in any other light it looks like steady if unspectacular progress.

It is interesting that so many people with access to good information got things wrong.

What, for example, was behind the leaks to the press just before the election, claiming that the party was so confident

of holding Guildford that resources had been diverted elsewhere? This looked like tempting fate, to put it no higher.

South Central region members were told after the first week not to bother going to Newbury, on the grounds that all was well. That region instead poured people into Maidenhead, although it was obvious with a week to go that it would not be won.

But it objected strongly to constituencies sending help to Watford because it was in a different region, even though Watford had a better campaign than Maidenhead and nearly did win. Was this obsession with regional boundaries happening elsewhere?

Speculation on how many seats would be gained is now history. But it becomes important if mistaken speculation becomes the driving force behind reviews of party policy and organisation.

No-one who expected 60-70 seats would regard 62 as a crisis, but those who expected 85-odd might well do so.

If the belief that the general election was a disaster is allowed to persist, the party will not go into this parliament planning sensibly to build on its progress, but in a panic looking for someone or something to blame for the dashing of hopes that should never have been raised in the first place.

That might explain the sudden assaults on conference, policy and local income tax.

Ed Davey, the primary proponent of the latter, clearly suffered some adverse briefing in the press after the election.

He is widely thought to be a future leadership contender, so those curious as to who might benefit from Davey being attacked might cast their gaze first towards other MPs in this category.

POLICY DEATH GREATLY EXAGGERATED

One fruit of the post-election panic was the 'year zero' announcement in relation to party policy, which would have left the general election manifesto as the sole extant piece of policy.

This was news to aghast Federal Policy Committee members, who rapidly convinced Charles Kennedy that this was an extremely silly idea, since it would have left the party either silent on some issues or unable to explain the substance of its proposals.

A small group has been sent away to put to sleep policy that is genuinely obsolete.

The details of the policy review itself is also at variance with what (presumably) Kennedy's panicky spinners imagined the lobby wished to hear.

It will not be arbitrarily butchering policy deemed 'embarrassing'. Instead, the *Meeting the Challenge* exercise, the actual rather than the imagined policy review, wishes to engage as much of the party as possible and, unless it appears that something has gone wrong with this, it should be taken at its word as an honest attempt to improve and rationalise policy.

Meeting the Challenge also appears to have a welcome logic to its work: it will look at what the party wants to stand for, then at which policies are needed to deliver that, and then at how these should be sold to the public.

WHO'LL COME A-LOSING DEPOSITS?

Liberator fears to discuss the Liberal Party's general election results in case we intrude upon private grief.

Of the 15 or so candidates, the only ones to save their deposit by crossing the 5% threshold were Steve Radford in Liverpool West Derby, and (by a hair's breadth) Fran Oborski in Wyre Forest, where the Liberal Democrats did not stand and in effect backed Independent MP Dr Richard Taylor.

Elsewhere, candidates ran in what appeared to be random seats and received derisory support.

Two years ago, there were serious talks about at least some Liberal Party members joining the Liberal Democrats, but these ran into the sand due to a lack of urgency on both sides.

With results like these, the Lib Dems are unlikely to consider the Liberal Party as worthy of any attention.

But if 17 years' work has left the party down among the also-rans, perhaps those in the Liberal Party who are not consumed by grudges from 1988 should reflect on whether they are accomplishing anything?

IN THE SHADOWS

It is a pity that Charles Kennedy did not steal himself to remove Mark Oaten from the home affairs portfolio in the post-election shadow cabinet reshuffle.

Oaten's excruciating performance over the house arrest legislation (Liberator 301) ought to have shown up the dangers of having someone who is an instinctive managerialist, rather than an instinctive liberal, in that job.

But Oaten does seem to have acquired a minder. His parliamentary team now includes Orkney and Shetland MP Alistair Carmichael, the most vocal opponent in the parliamentary party of whole 'Orange Book' approach of right-wing posturing.

Meanwhile, the confusion over who does what in the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister is mirrored in Liberal Democrat ranks.

Both John Prescott and David Miliband are ODPM cabinet ministers, with no one knowing which of them does what.

The Liberal Democrats decided to reflect this barmy arrangement, with Simon Hughes shadowing Prescott and Sarah Teather shadowing Miliband.

It soon became evident that neither of them knew who should shadow what, since the real ministers concerned did not know either.

Hughes made a pitch to take the housing brief off Teather, which she firmly rebutted, leaving him to his party presidential duties.

WE'VE GOT YOUR NUMBER

The Liberal Democrats are noted for their support for civil liberty, and for opposition to identity cards and pointless state intrusion.

So the party will look pretty silly when the media, exhibitors and anyone else who is not a delegate get to see the registration forms for this September's conference in Blackpool.

These demand passport numbers, driving licence numbers and car registration numbers ("required regardless of whether you will be driving to the conference or not"). All

these documents are also supposed to be inspected by a counter-signatory.

There is a warning that the information will not merely be held by the police in relation to this conference but may be "passed to other police departments in relation to subsequent events". Whether these subsequent events are future party conferences is not explained.

This questionnaire makes the party look ridiculous. It is supposed to champion liberty but has tamely caved into demands from Lancashire Police for information that their counterparts in Dorset and Sussex seem to manage perfectly well without at conferences there.

Even in the immediate aftermath of the Brighton bomb, the Tory conference never demanded anyone's passport number.

What is worse, there is no real security imperative behind it. Delegates are not being asked for any of this information, so anyone who wants to cause some disturbance at conference can merely pay a tenner to join their local party, for which there is no security check, and turn up as a non-voting member or day visitor to do whatever they like.

The try out for increased security at Harrogate saw the party's conference computer server crash because it could not cope with either being moved or the additional security demands placed on it, which hardly bodes well.

The Federal Conference Committee blames this nonsense on the police, but has itself signally failed to do anything to try to reason with them.

This is all yet another good reason never again to hold conference in the decrepit 1950s time warp that is Blackpool.

LEICESTER PIG'S EAR

One collective member who turned up in Leicester South during the general election was greeted with mysterious allusions to "problems in the local party" when he asked how the campaign was faring.

On asking whether these problems concerned ethic rivalries, he received the answer "oh, those as well".

It appears that former MP Parmajit Singh Gill contrived to fall out with the local party in record time, leading to a parliamentary career rivalled for its short span only by David Austick, who was MP for Ripon for seven months in 1973/74.

The party has got pretty good at holding windfall by-election gains, and it looks as if local factors lay behind this debacle.

Meanwhile, Leicester politics continue on their colourful course, with Lib Dem Roger Blackmore again leading a joint administration with the Tories.

Last November, the previous Lib-Con administration fell when the Tories mutinied, putting Labour back into office temporarily, 18 months after it had been evicted from power for the first time in 25 years. It sounds like never a dull moment.

PLEASE GIVE GENEROUSLY

It is a long time since we have heard of Lord Holme, David Steel's former henchman, who later fulfilled the same role for Paddy Ashdown. Holme left front-line politics in 1997 to spend more time with his directorships, and chaired the Broadcasting Standards Council until a mishap in a hotel with the News of the World.

Liberator hears that his lordship has lost a substantial five-figure sum by optimistic spread betting on the general election result, surely a sum that even a man of Holme's wealth would miss.

BOWL OF CONTENTION

It's only July but competition is hotting up for the Mitcham and Morden Commemorative Gold Toilet.

As regular readers will know, this is awarded for the worst motion submitted for each Lib Dem conference.

A new entrant this year is the Federal Executive, which submitted a constitutional amendment intended to bring in two-year terms for members of federal committees.

In addition to scoring the reverse double of being both divisive and pointless, it mixed up its 'biannual' with its 'biennial', among a panoply of errors which drove the Federal Conference Committee to rule the amendment out of order as it had no idea what it meant.

Meanwhile, is Birmingham Yardley MP John Hemming limbering up for this accolade? He has had a parliamentary question on "how many public toilets there were on a given date in each year between 1990 and 2004, broken down by Government Office region".

Information from the Valuation Office Agency showed that there are 4,853 in England, compared with 5,342 four years ago.

Of these, slightly under one quarter are, for some reason, in the south west. Must be the cider.

CHEADLE CHOICE

Stockport Council leader Mark Hunter is an entirely good thing, and indeed was a Liberator Collective member in the 1970s. He will doubtless make an excellent MP for Cheadle in succession to Patsy Calton if, as expected, he wins the impending by-election.

The process by which he was selected seems rather less excellent.

Just before the Hartlepool by-election, a row broke out over the exclusion from consideration as a candidate of Reg Clark, even though he grew up in the area, had fought the seat before and was at the time the federal party treasurer.

This sort of opaque selection now appears to be a feature of by-elections.

Five applicants went to be grilled in Cowley Street on 16 June, of whom only Hunter was deemed a suitable by-election candidate by the powers that be, and so was selected.

Among the other applicants were Jackie Pearcey and Paula Keaveney, both of whom are experienced parliamentary candidates.

Were there really only five applicants in the first place; it seems rather low for such a vacancy?

Everyone knows that the rigours of a by-election are different from those faced when fighting an obscure and unwinnable seat, but even the Labour Party affords its members a choice of by-election candidates.

GOODBYE 'BEADS WITHOUT STRING'

Meeting the Challenge aims to make Lib Dem policies hang together, says Duncan Brack

Some people say that the party needs to provide a compelling 'narrative'. Others that it needs a 'moral core' to its individual policies, or 'themes', or a set of 'principles', or an 'ideology'. Whatever you call it, the party completely failed to communicate it during the 2005 election.

Which is not to say that it doesn't exist – you can find versions of it in the preamble to the party constitution, or the 2002 policy paper *It's About Freedom*, or in the entries in a book I edited in 1996, *Why I Am a Liberal Democrat*.

And it's not to say that we didn't communicate any policies during the campaign – in fact, 2005 was the first election for generations when the electorate recognised more than one idea as emanating from the Lib Dems. Polling evidence shows that local income tax, the removal of tuition fees and opposition to the Iraq war were all clearly identified with the party.

What we didn't manage to do was to make it all hang together, to communicate what the party stands for in a way which led to people understanding instinctively what our position would be. For example, if we had succeeded in associating the party with the 'fairness' theme used in the pre-manifesto, people might then have understood that local income tax was a Lib Dem policy because it was a fair one (polling evidence showed that they did think it was fair, and they knew it was a Lib Dem policy, but the two facts bore little relation to each other).

This is not easy to do, so a group of us on the Federal Policy Committee came up with the idea, last summer, of organising policy-making in the next parliament so that it built a coherent message right from the beginning, rather than leaving it until the election run-up to pull together a rather disparate bunch of policy papers and motions.

An important part of the same exercise is to test our existing policy platform against what is happening in the real world – in terms of economic, social, environmental and international developments – and specifically against the challenges that anyone in government in the UK is likely to face after the next election. Is our policy on climate change, for example, really adequate to deal with the growing evidence of accelerating global warming and the likelihood of a sudden dramatic shift in climate?

All this ended up as what is known as the *Meeting the Challenge* exercise. The FPC approved the concept in January, and the working group's membership in March. Its aim is to produce a final report which will:

- look at the major trends in the domestic economy and society, and the international situation, over the coming ten to twenty years, and the challenges these will throw up for politics and political parties;
- examine the concerns, hopes and fears of the electorate and how the trends identified in are likely to interact with them;
- consider how the application of basic Liberal Democrat principles, as set out in *It's About Freedom*, to these issues might begin to present a coherent set of answers to the main challenges in politics;
- look at how party policy stands up to the likely challenges, both 'real-world' and 'political' and where it may need development and modification; and
- using this framework, map out a more detailed programme of policy development for the next four years.

The final paper will be subject to debate at the 2006 autumn conference. The first output from the exercise will be a consultation paper, available in August 2005. This will be discussed at a major consultative session at Blackpool and, we hope, at regional and local party meetings throughout the party, and within party bodies and publications.

Liberator 302 contained much discussion of various proposals put forward after the election to reform the party's policy-making process, partly to get away from the perceived problem of being attacked on policies agreed by conference but not included in the manifesto.

Let me assure you that this debate has nothing at all to do with the *Meeting the Challenge* exercise (just as well, given the highly suspect analysis on which it was based). The FPC is thinking about this separately, and will report back to conference on its proposals.

The point of this exercise is to start to build the party's political narrative. Starting from the ideological framework approved by conference in *It's About Freedom*, we want to make sure that the policies and campaigning messages, which the party will derive from that set of core beliefs, together build a coherent and consistent picture of what Liberal Democrats in government will do.

It's an ambitious task and we're bound to upset people along the way – indeed, if we don't, we'll probably have failed in our aim of being clear about what Liberal Democrats are about.

I look forward to contributions from Liberator readers.

Duncan Brack is vice chair of the 'Meeting the Challenge' working group, and also chairs the Federal Conference Committee.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

The Liberal Democrats lack a compelling narrative. David Boyle suggests that a radical form of decentralisation is the answer

There used to be a member of the policy unit team at Cowley Street who would cast your horoscope in return for a light lunch.

He peered closely at mine as we ate our omelettes and picked out something that he found in many Liberal Democrat birth charts. "I think it means unreasonable optimism," he said.

This struck me as profoundly true of us, and it isn't a weakness either. I intend to keep my optimism as unreasonable as possible.

But we should beware of the times when mild knee-jerk optimism gets in the way of us perceiving either threats or opportunities or prevents us from achieving our ambition.

There is one mighty threat we seem currently too lazily optimistic to face. The story about the infinite number of monkeys with typewriters eventually producing Shakespeare plays also applies to the Conservative Party.

Eventually, they will produce a leader capable of rising above the contradictions we optimistically assume will prevent any kind of revival.

As I write, the *Daily Telegraph* is devoting the week to a series of articles on localism by leading Conservatives: it is a sign that an outbreak of sanity in their party may not be far off.

There is also one mighty opportunity that we are missing, as we engage in the traditionally optimistic Lib Dem business of deciding whether we should concentrate on attracting Labour or Tory votes.

The truth is that, for the kind of tectonic shift in UK politics we aspire to, we simply can't afford the gently optimistic view that we have a choice.

If we are serious about turning the system upside down – and we have to be to make any more progress – then we will need to construct a new electoral alliance drawn from both sides.

That doesn't mean shifting to the right or the left. It means articulating a recognisably Liberal Democrat idea capable of attracting the various hopes projected onto us from across the political spectrum.

And exciting enough to attract enthusiastic loyalty. And important enough to explain the problems the nation faces, and to provide the 'narrative' we need.

It also needs to be one that is so obviously Lib Dem that the other parties can't go there themselves.

And it needs to be real: a promise of genuine change for all those intractable post-war issues that governments dare not mention. And we have to believe it enough to articulate it uncompromisingly.

But listen to the zeitgeist for a moment, and you'll find that there is such an idea growing in importance, and it is ours. And, as long as we articulate it in as broad a way as possible, it is the key to effective public services and more control over our lives.

Not just decentralisation, or even 'Big Bang Localism' – Simon Jenkins's proposal that most power should be radically decentralised on one day – but something that goes to the heart of why so little works in Britain.

Let's call it, just for this article, 'Decentralisation Plus'.

This is not decentralisation as we have known and loved it so far – an abstruse debate about the precise administrative arrangements and boundaries for timid devolution from Whitehall. Nor is it just the dramatic shift of power to parishes, districts and cities. Nor just the abolition of quangos or the devolution of the NHS to elected counties.

It is a policy that articulates a whole critique of centralisation that goes deeper than we have done before: recognising, for example, that:

- Big administrative systems and institutions are deeply inefficient and ineffective.
- Local people and frontline staff have invaluable experience and skills and are more able to solve problems than diktat from Whitehall.
- Far from efficiency savings from centralisation, we are stuck with horrendous externalities – damaging mistakes and hospital bugs in big hospitals, disaffection and failure in factory schools.
- People want relationships with their local doctors, police, teachers. They know face-to-face institutions deliver, while centralised institutions and private monopolies don't.
- Nothing that professionals do to make us well, educate us or tackle crime will work without the active involvement of those they are trying to help.
- People want their towns to be distinctive and to defend their high streets against identikit monopolistic megastores.

Decentralisation Plus is about why government is so ineffective – why prisons are so useless at reducing crime, why the NHS is so useless at preventing illness, why the welfare state is so useless at reducing poverty.

In short, it is about public services and why – despite some of the investment we have demanded actually being made – they still do not work.

There will be arguments ahead where we have remained for too long on the sidelines. Will decentralisation mean more varied service quality? Will it mean more inequality?

We will argue that the reverse is the case. There will be more varied services, because local people want different things. But the role of the centre will change: from disempowering bullying over details, it will develop a new kind of inspectorate that raises standards through training, and through working with local institutions where they need it – and through legal minimum standards.

The old lie that centralisation means more equality can be demolished with a quick look at some of the health service deserts that now exist – under the most centralised system in Europe – in the poorest areas of Britain.

The truth is that centralised control means that the elites are better able to capture more than their fair share of resources.

Nick Clegg and Richard Grayson's fascinating 2002 pamphlet on education systems in Europe showed that the most decentralised administrations, in Holland and Scandinavia, were also the best funded and the most equal.

But Decentralisation Plus is about more than just why public services are so intractable. It is also about why our towns are so ugly, why our pubs, banks, playing fields and post offices are dwindling away. This is a policy designed to confront centralised corporate monopolies as well as centralised public ones.

It is about the failure of government monopoly policy to reign in the destruction of small shops at the hands of the monopoly supermarkets – a policy carried out in the name of choice, which actually restricts choice to what a handful of distant corporate buyers decide we should have.

If you don't believe me, try buying English apples in Safeways, or local honey – a well-known antidote to hay fever – almost anywhere.

Government support for corporate centralisation is undermining choice, grubbing up our agricultural resources, and transforming once-proud and independent towns and high streets into identikit clones.

Impoverished clones too. When there is a healthy proportion of locally owned business, then local earnings stay circulating locally. When there isn't, they shoot straight off to the corporate headquarters, leaving local authorities wondering why their expensive regeneration schemes failed to work.

DISAPPEARING LOCAL ASSETS

- Wholesalers, on which small shops depend, are closing at the rate of six every week.
- People who live in strong social networks are healthier and less likely to die prematurely.
- London alone has lost 1,500 football pitches since 1989.
- 60 local and cottage hospitals closed in 2002 alone.
- Britain lost a third of its local bank network from 1992 to 2002.
- Medication errors, a symptom of giantism in NHS hospitals, now costs the NHS £500 million a year. Hospital infections, another symptom, cost twice that.
- Up to 20 traditional pubs close every month.
- 520,000 people are re-admitted to hospital because there are no social networks to make sure they are secure at home (cost: £3.6 billion a year).
- The average person now has to travel 893 miles a year to buy food.
- Only 18 per cent of urban parks are now in good condition.

Decentralisation Plus is an attack on the assumptions of technocrats everywhere, but it is more than that. It is about devolving responsibility as well as power.

Inside all this lies a radical new offer from politicians to the public. Not any more 'ask and you shall receive' – nobody believes that any more, least of all the voters. It says: we can achieve these things, but not without your help.

As politicians we can assist, we can provide leadership and some resources, but – they must say to the public – we can't do it without you.

Decentralisation Plus is radical, but not so radical that all other European countries have shunned it. It is neither obviously right or left, and it has the distinct advantage that neither of our opponents can quite get there.

Labour mouths the tenets of localism, but dares not let go. The Tories are clearly shifting in this direction, but will never take on Tesco and Wal-mart as well as Whitehall – and will therefore make the whole thing meaningless.

Even the various eurosceptic parties are vulnerable to this approach. It is as bureaucrat-sceptic as they are, but provides a philosophical depth which they can't – though it would, from our point of view, imply a strong European framework.

Yes, Decentralisation Plus carries risks. It means that local institutions and people with responsibility might get it badly wrong. But we will be campaigning there to make sure they don't – it's democracy.

Yes, the technocratic wing of the party will worry about it. Because they do not quite believe people and communities can be trusted without professional help from London.

But we should remember Gladstone's watchword: "Liberalism means trust in the people tempered by prudence…. Toryism means distrust in the people tempered by fear."

Let's make sure it stays that way.

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TIME FOR A REALITY CHECK

The rejection of the European Constitution by Dutch and French voters is just the tip of an iceberg, argues Simon Titley

"It is time to give ourselves a reality check," Tony Blair told the European Parliament on 23 June. He was referring only to the European Union, but he doesn't realise the half of it.

The French and Dutch referendum results were the outcome of a more fundamental problem, the widespread popular alienation from the whole political system. Instead of addressing this issue, most commentators chose to ride their familiar hobbyhorses.

Predictably, in Britain there were delusional reactions across the political spectrum. Eurosceptics saw these results not only as a vindication of their position (without noticing the irony of their expressions of solidarity with foreigners), but also viewed them as a purely EU-related phenomenon.

First prize for the most ridiculous Eurosceptic hyperbole of the season must go to the London *Evening Standard*. Following the breakdown of the EU summit on 17 June, that night's front-page headline screamed, "Now it's war".

Unfortunately, the reaction of Europhiles was little better. They seized on the incoherence of the 'no' camp to suggest that voters were stupid, ignorant or gullible, and their votes somehow invalid.

Let us first of all strip away some myths about the motivations of 'no' voters in France and the Netherlands. A Eurobarometer survey of public opinion was conducted in both countries immediately after each referendum. The main reasons for French 'no' voters were:

31% - The economy/jobs will suffer
26% - Because the economy is bad
19% - Because it's too 'liberal' an economic plan
18% - Opposition to the national government and president
16% - Not socialist enough for Europe
12% - Too complex
6% - Against Turkey joining the EU
5% - Loss of national sovereignty

The main reasons for their Dutch counterparts were:

32% - Lack of information
19% - Loss of national sovereignty
14% - Opposition to the national government
13% - Europe is too expensive
8% - Opposition to European integration
7% - It will have negative effects on employment, etc.

Whatever else these results indicated, it was not the wet dream of the British Eurosceptic press. Both results were less 'anti-European' than a manifestation of a broader problem, a growing sense of emotional distance from political institutions at both a national and international level, already evident in declining political participation and more volatile voting habits among those who still vote.

We are witnessing a massive breakdown in trust, and it is not confined to politics. Everywhere one looks, once-respected individuals and institutions are losing popular trust. Doctors, the police, big business, the royal family – groups that once enjoyed a 'blue chip' reputation have seen their respect and trust eroded. Traditional elites are being rejected and, because they do not understand why, their responses are inept.

There is a tendency among right-wingers to assume that this alienation is entirely a product of politics and the public sector, but it is just as evident in people's feelings towards big business, both as customers and employees. Shoshana Zuboff and James Maxmin, in their book *The Support Economy*, catalogue the growing popular dissatisfaction with poor customer service, and the growing impatience of workers with old-fashioned, hierarchical management.

The basic cause of these reactions against political and business oligarchies is the radical social transformation in western societies over the past fifty years. People have more opportunity yet a deepening sense of insecurity. Despite achieving unprecedented material well-being, they live in a more impersonal world with an uncertain future.

What changed? Until the 1960s, most people had their identities given to them by the traditional groups to which they belonged (family, community, social class or church). Today, most people create their own identities and select their own peer groups. This individualism has been brought about by a combination of affluence, education, secularisation, technological advance and sexual liberation, which released the majority of people from lives circumscribed by day-to-day subsistence and group dogma, and which popularised the concept of 'lifestyle choice'.

But this process of individual liberation has proved something of a double-edged sword because, although it has enabled most people in Western societies to lead easier and more pleasant lives, it has also led people to forsake social cohesion for materialist individualism.

Self-realisation and affluence are preferable conditions to conformity and poverty, but they have not necessarily led to people having a greater sense of control over their lives. John Kampfner, writing in the *Observer* (27 March), pointed to the spiritual emptiness in our modern, atomised society.

"A reliable flow of disposable income does not automatically translate into security or well-being. Look around your average British small town. By day, you see high streets denuded of character as the big retailers dominate and, at night, people out on benders staggering from pub to pub. This is not part of an audition for Grumpy Old Men. This is what people, who resent being valued only as

consuming objects, told me… It is this emptiness, I would argue, that is being manifested now."

We have more wealth and choice than ever before, but never have people felt more alone. They inhabit a world of alienation from the cradle to the grave. They are born in industrial-scale maternity units (remember the machine that goes 'ping' in Monty Python's *Meaning of Life* ?). They are educated in factory schools designed for a bygone industrial age. They hate their insecure jobs (average employee turnover in Europe is now between 2.5 and 3 years). They retire to an uncertain pension and die in large hospitals, wired up to more machines that go 'ping'.

People are better educated and more assertive. At the same time, most of their social relationships have been replaced by economic ones. They have 'choice' but mainly of a trivial, consumerist variety, and feel they have little control over their lives. Their anger and frustration may be incoherent but are no less real for that.

Our institutions and leaders do not understand what is happening and have failed to adapt to meet popular expectations. An example was the recent Tory election slogan, 'Are you thinking what we're thinking?' Frank Furedi, writing in *Spiked* (4 May), noted "when the Tories ask 'are you thinking what we're thinking?', what they really want to know is: 'What the hell is on your mind?' The question is posed in a way that suggests the Tories possess a privileged insight into the minds of the British public, but scratch away the thin layer of smugness and all that is left is a group of dazed politicians, genuinely unsure about what they are thinking, never mind us."

The only answer to this basic ignorance among our political and business elites is for them to enter into a real engagement with people. Only through such interaction can we begin to re-connect our institutions to the people they are meant to serve.

Unfortunately, our elites disdain and avoid contact with the public. They prefer to outsource such contacts to consultants and advisors. They use polls, surveys and focus groups to try and find out what people are thinking. But these formal and artificial methods do not supply a real insight into popular concerns, nor do they keep the elites in touch. Only genuine dialogue can do that.

That is not to say that political leaders should follow rather than lead public opinion. On the contrary, European politics is hamstrung by its lack of leadership. It is rather that, to lead people, you must engage them and carry their opinion with you.

What are the lessons for the European Union? In the short term, everyone must recognise that the constitution is dead. From a technical standpoint, the constitution was a more logical rulebook for running the EU institutions than the present arrangements. The problem is that technocratic solutions won't work.

Theodore Zeldin, writing in the *Observer* (29 May), remarked that, "Europe is a fact. But it still needs to become a dream. …the French [referendum] campaign has shown that the European constitution, written by lawyers focusing on rules and regulations, rather than by poets expressing new emotions, allows old emotions to prevail."

When the EU was born in the post-war era, relevant and powerful emotional links existed. Most Europeans had had a recent, first-hand and traumatic experience of war and starvation. A new set of political arrangements that would prevent these horrors represented a political narrative to which everyone could relate.

An equivalent narrative is missing today. Few people under 65 have any memory of war or starvation. The useful but workaday drudgery of the EU institutions, largely concerned with technical harmonisation directives, cannot fill the emotional gap.

It is not as if the ingredients for a modern narrative do not exist. There is a curious cognitive dissonance about Europe. British people inhabit a world in which they can routinely take cheap flights to Prague or Lisbon; go on booze cruises to Calais; buy a range of food and drink once regarded as exotic; and buy holiday homes in Spain or retire to France. Such activities would not be impossible without the EU; rather, the EU makes such travel and trading easier and more likely. But while people are living the European dream in these and many other practical ways, their perceptions of the EU are quite separate from their experiences.

Popular hostility to the EU constitution does not imply support for or opposition to any particular vision of the EU, whether it be a free-trade area, a closer union of nation states or a federal superstate. Instead, it tells us that, whichever future is chosen, the EU can no longer develop in any direction without a renewal of civic engagement.

Let me give one small example. Local butchers in my home county of Lincolnshire launched a campaign last year to persuade the EU to give 'protected geographical indication status' to the Lincolnshire Sausage. This would provide locally made sausages with statutory protection, under EU regulations that protect food names on a geographical basis. If the campaigners are successful, only sausages made in Lincolnshire to a traditional recipe may be sold as 'Lincolnshire Sausages'. Imitations made outside the county could no longer be passed off as the real thing.

More imaginative political leadership would not only support such local initiatives but also link up similar producers across Europe, enabling them to discuss their common concerns and campaign jointly (something the existing raft of bureaucratic European trade associations has singularly failed to do). By joining the dots, a genuine pan-European polity could be built from the ground up.

The political benefit of such work is that it would demonstrate the value of the EU to the ordinary citizen, who might otherwise perceive it as a remote bureaucracy. The more the EU becomes a forum where local people can campaign for their interests, the more it will have come of age, and the more it can evolve in tune with popular needs and opinion.

The referendum defeats were a necessary catharsis for the EU. A crisis was inevitable and, the longer it might have been deferred, the worse it would have been. What, then, is the main lesson of this sorry episode? Less constitution, more sausage.

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BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARD

Europe's leaders will have to rethink the way forward after the French and Dutch referendums, because the European Union's role in the world is too important to be neglected, says Wendy Kyrle-Pope

In years to come, will we (as on 22 November 1963 or 11 September 2001) remember where we were and what we were doing at 9pm on 29 May 2005, when the polls for the French referendum closed?

Pro-Europeans were still hoping for a Liverpool-style penalty shoot-out comeback for the 'oui' camp, but the (very accurate, as it turned out) exit polls boomed 45% 'oui', 55% 'non'.

A heavy pall of disappointment, but not altogether surprise, descended. But worse was to come in Holland three days later. It was not the fact that the 'nees' won, but the smack in the face delivered by the 61.3% of a 62% turnout that supported that 'nee'. A mortal wound for the European dream?

But what exactly was being rejected? Some may have, like the sad scribbler of this piece, read through the constitution, picking out the good bits (sport, animals, arts, Africa), comparing the revisions to the original treaties, failing to understand fully great swathes of it, but coming to the conclusion that it didn't feel much like a constitution, should not have been called a constitution, but rather should have been entitled: 'A treaty for the (much needed) reform and reconstitution of existing EU institutions, bringing in line pan-European legislation for all member states, old and new, and generally having a tidy-up'.

Neither catchy nor succinct, but probably a fairer description of the thing.

The C-word put voters off, and made the French and the Dutch use this housekeeping exercise to vent their misery, disappointment and fear for their individual national identities. Europe is not ready for a proper constitution - yet. The time is not right.

Unfortunate timing and bad management because, as Green MEP Jean Lambert so sagely pointed out, why was this vote not held on, if not the same day, at least in the same week, in every member state?

Any hiatus between elections destroys the momentum of the positive aspects of any issue, and gives too much time for the forces of destruction, inertia and fear to play on voters' minds. Unfortunate timing too, because the mood in the two 'no' states was neither self-confident nor outward looking.

Extensive (and usually gloating) analysis by the media has given the reasons. In France, where both the main parties (the governing, conservative UMP and the Socialists) were in favour of the constitution, both had dissidents campaigning for a 'no'. An unholy coalition of far left and far right, trade unions, and a mixed bag of some farmers' groups, Greens and the anti-globalisation movement, comprised the 'no' camp.

Fears were that the Anglo-Saxon (now used as a pejorative term) style free market would further undermine the welfare state, and this combined with a suspicion that Polish plumbers would flood the market and price out the home workforce; and, of course, the terror of Turkey.

Dutch voters cited fears about immigration, considerable dissatisfaction with the euro, which many say has caused unprecedented inflation, and fury at the way France and Germany have broken EU rules on budget deficits. They fear the diminution of the equal power currently enjoyed by the smaller member states.

More important than any of the above, was the zeitgeist of the two countries. France feels most acutely its loss of influence in Brussels as a result of the accession of new member states in 2004, as it has felt the loss of its influence in the world at large over the last 20 years. The French cannot believe that their culture has not been put at the heart of Europe, used as the template for all civilised societies.

From the very dawn of the Common Market, the Dutch, like the gentle giant farm horses of Flemish landscapes, have pulled the heavy cart of progress towards the union, but are now exhausted. They feel that the gulf between the governed and the governing in Holland is now enormous.

Malaise, depression and the glorious rebelliousness of the French on the one hand, and straws-on-camel's-back exhaustion in Holland on the other, plus deep fear of immigration in both, were the real causes for the 'no' camps' successes. They felt the mood of their countries correctly, capturing and capitalising on it.

However, there are reasons to be cheerful, or at least not to top ourselves yet awhile.

The history of the EU is littered with 'nos' - famously, De Gaulle in the 1960s about British entry because they were "insular and maritime" (and Anglo-Saxon obviously), and the Danish rejection of Maastricht.

Time and again, Europe has actually progressed more when the process of its creation has been brought to an abrupt and seemingly dead halt by one state or other's hissy fit.

It is these regular examples of intransigence which have given Europe the political impetus and energy to move forward; we are better at overcoming obstacles than merely letting the whole process run smoothly.

What of those who have already voted 'yes', whether out of passion or plain pragmatism? Eight countries have ratified the treaty by parliamentary vote: Austria, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia and Slovenia.

Spain held a referendum, which voted 77% 'yes'. Germany's two Houses have passed the treaty, but are awaiting the outcome of a constitutional appeal before final ratification. What happens to them? Ignore them? And what of the remaining states yet to vote?

At the time of writing, the leaders of the EU have just failed to come up with an answer. What a waste of time, money and energy at a time when the EU family ought to be pulling together and presenting a united front to rein in the US policeman of the world, sort out Africa, Aids, China, crime and climate change.

The process, however flawed, must continue. Then, we will have to start again, but this takes courage, leadership, vision and not a little clairvoyance.

Courage, because those of us who are passionate pro-Europeans, whatever our view on the constitution, are described as being out of touch and an intellectual elite, which used to be a nice, desirable thing to be, but now, like Anglo-Saxon, is about as insulting as it gets.

We must shout, like Alexander Alexandrovitch Gromeko in Dr Zhivago, "I am one of the people too", one of those who believes that the future of the UK is at Europe's heart.

Some of the smaller states, Finland in particular, are showing enviable leadership. The Finns had the courage to explain what the real reason is behind the courtship of Turkey - at the moment seen as unacceptable on human rights, black economy, geography and other grounds - its capacity to breed. They can see the falling birth rate amongst indigenous Europeans as one of the greatest threats to our future labour market, economies, welfare and security.

What we have to do is to remind the electorate of all member states, but particularly our own, of the vision which lies behind the process, the three main tenets.

Economic union so that we may build the strongest trade block in the world; free trade with one another and fair trade with poorer nations, essential in these days of globalisation, which is here to stay, like it or not. We must continue to develop social cohesion and to be a beacon of human rights for the world. And, in this time of climate change, ensure our energy and industry are sustainable.

The future of the EU is just as likely to be shaped and determined by factors outside its control as within it. Here we must gaze into our crystal ball.

We are beginning to feel the dragon's breath of China, a dragon asleep for the best part of a century, now slowly awakening. A mere sleepy twitch of its tail has flooded the EU with textiles, to such an extent that the EU had to act to restrict their market here. The billion or so Chinese souls are emerging from their Dark Age and want cars, tellies and fridges, all of which have to be fuelled, sending pollution levels soaring. And then there is its sabre rattling at defenceless Japan; what might happen if there were a war?

The US may go to Japan's defence, but what if it were beaten by China? And even without (another) war, where will the US be in two decades time? It is today's imperial power, but cannot grasp this fact.

Its ruling class is ageing, its politicians and legislature have the attention span of a gnat, knee jerking in reaction to world events. The trade deficit grows and grows, and the mighty dollar is weakening and could be worthless in two decades. And Africa? Will it continue to be decimated by Aids and suffer corruption and cruelty?

So get over it and on with it, Europe. The world is a scary, dangerous and endangered place, and here we are fussing over yet another a bit of paper, one of the thousands which binds us together anyway. Treat the French and Dutch votes as just another hiccup, another non-event, along the way, and have another go. We owe it to ourselves and the rest of the world.

Wendy Kyrle-Pope is a member of the Liberator Collective and a former chair of the Outer London Europe group.

THE KING AND I

Liberal International's latest congress was held in Bulgaria, a republic ruled by a liberal king. Mark Smulian reports

I have brought about peace in the Middle East. After decades of war, terrorism and occupation, quiet reigns in the region. Honest.

My success where generations of UN officials, prime ministers and presidents have failed came about in the peculiar conditions of a Liberal International congress, the proceedings of which require a certain suspension of disbelief – we all have to pretend that someone outside the conference centre gives a monkey's what resolutions LI passes.

The latest LI congress took place in Sofia, Bulgaria, in May, in the Palace of Culture, a post-Stalinist edifice that looks as though it had just landed from outer space in Sofia's main public park.

Inside it was all vast spaces and dim lighting, with the congress's main proceedings taking place in a large hall where, no doubt, five-year plans for tractor output were once announced.

It was hosted by the country's two liberal parties. The smaller, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, the party of the Turkish minority, has been a member for a long time, but the governing party only became a full member at this congress.

It is called the National Movement of Simeon II, because Bulgaria is a republic ruled by a king who is the prime minister.

This confusing situation came about when, after a period of instability, Simeon Saxe-Coburg Gotha, son of the last tsar and cousin to Britain's royal family, formed his own party and won.

How long such a personalistic party can outlive its founder is unclear, but members I spoke to seemed determined that the party should not just be the vehicle for him, but a conventional centre/liberal party.

One British Lib Dem who knows the party, described it as "like the SDP, they haven't got past the stage of thinking that all political problems can be solved by common sense and people talking to each other".

Because LI is a federation of parties, it tries – at times rather painfully – to proceed by consensus.

To my surprise, I found myself leading the British delegation in the working group on 'miscellaneous resolutions' and did the best I could with a stack of amendments in our name that none of us present had previously seen.

All proceeded merrily until we reached Iraq. The VVD is the more right-wing of the two Dutch liberal parties, and its international policy appears to consist of seeking to water down anything controversial.

The VVD's attempt to change 'Liberal International notes that the Iraqi people are still living under terrible conditions… and in a very poor security situation' to 'under difficult conditions… and in a problematic security situation' was easily swatted aside as nonsense.

However, the VVD won on the great 'with and under' debate. They wanted to say that Iraqis lived 'with presence of foreign troops', a statement so bland it could apply to the UK, given American troops are stationed here.

The British argued in vain for 'under the presence' but lost, even though this went to the plenary session.

It was the plenary that saw the congress manage to have a huge row about, of all things, human rights in Darfur.

This motion, proposed by the German LI group, had somehow grown from merely deploring abuses and calling for UN intervention in this case, to one that called for a permanent UN military force.

There was some feeling that this conflated two different issues and that a permanent UN military force should not go through on the nod tacked onto a motion about Darfur.

At least, it appeared that was what happened. The proceedings had been entirely orderly and in English until a German and a Spanish speaker began bellowing at each other – each in their own language – while the VVD raised points of order in English and the rest of the congress looked on bemused.

In the mêlée that followed, the motion was withdrawn and sent to the next LI executive, no doubt procedurally correct but politically unwise since it left the congress saying nothing on Darfur.

This showed the congress at its worst – unable to make a simple statement because it had tied itself in procedural knots.

Ironically, it managed to have a row about human rights in Darfur, something all Liberals favour, while a motion on the Middle East, the subject of deep controversy, went through without dissent.

Why this happened is illustrative of how LI proceeds. The Norwegian party Venstre had presented a motion that deplored the effects on the Palestinians of Israel's security

wall, and called for this to be built, if at all, along Israel's internationally recognised frontier.

The Israeli party Shinui, whose secularism in that country is admirable and whose participation in the Sharon government is rather less so, rewrote the motion to support the wall.

The VVD then rewrote a different version, which was rather anodyne and identified a long shopping list of issues that should be part of a final peace deal.

A small group was convened to find a way through this. The Israelis dug in, but knew that they might well lose were the entire motion to go to the plenary. Venstre wanted to make sure that the congress did not by some back door way appear to accept the fence.

Since neither the American resident with a portable map of disputed West Bank aquifers, nor the Israeli who responded to every point by shouting "we were attacked", were likely to agree with each other, it fell to the rest of us to find some suitably bland form of words.

The trick was to get some questioning of the fence's existence acceptable to both sides into the VVD's shopping list.

Increasingly frustrated by nitpicking and sloganising, I suggested that the 'fair and just solution' we were discussing should include agreement on "the location of the border [and] the relocation and continued existence of the security fence".

To my astonishment, this provoked a sudden outbreak of amity among everyone except with the man with the map and the man with the mouth, and Shinui and Venstre retired together to write the final motion.

The result may have been so anodyne as to be hardly worth saying, but it allowed a united statement to be made, which is what really counts at these congresses.

It is easy to mock this tortuous search for compromise wordings but there is some reason for it, given the diversity LI tries to include.

Although its origins lie in western Europe and Canada, there is now a large and welcome presence from eastern Europe, Africa, Asia and, to a lesser extent, South America.

These parties work in conditions that vary from political freedom, to systems with the outward form of democracy but not the substance, to those that operate in the most adverse conditions of threats to personal safety.

Special messages of support were sent to Zimbabwe's MDC and to the Sam Rainsy Party of Cambodia, both of which are repressed to the point where they can barely function.

Rainsy had been due to speak, but was unable to attend and a Filipino MP stood in to give a disturbing account of how the party is run under constant harassment.

Zimbabwe is now unusual in Africa in that the political situation for liberals is getting worse, while progress elsewhere for Africa Liberal Network members is modestly encouraging.

The network has about 15 members and an uphill struggle, but it is one of those liberal organisations whose very existence would have been hard to imagine only a few years ago.

Unfortunately, LI's constitution does not as yet guarantee that each continent gets a seat on the bureau, the body that runs the organisation.

Voting for this is always a matter of horse trading between delegations under STV.

British votes went mainly to the MRF's Dzhevdet Chakarov and the DPP's Bi-khim Hsiao, it being felt that it was important to have an impeccably liberal Muslim and an equally liberal young Asian woman on the bureau.

Other votes were split in careful proportions, but I did wonder what we were doing giving any votes to Wolfgang Gerhardt of Germany's Free Democrats.

FDP grandee Otto von Lamsdorff made a deplorable speech of commendation for Gerhardt in which he boasted (correctly as it turned out) that the FDP and the Christian Democrats would shortly turf out "the last left wing government in Germany", the Social Democrat/Green coalition of North Rhine Westphalia.

I suspect most British Lib Dems would choose the red/green coalition over the Christian Democrats any day.

For more than 20 years, the FDP has abandoned its old balancing role to become a semi-independent adjunct of Germany's conservatives, and there seems no good reason to help it to influence LI.

Running an LI Congress is an expensive business for the host party, not least because the delegates have to be fed and watered each evening.

The first night's dinner included the alarmingly named 'wolf salad' and the perplexing 'garage cake'.

The next dinner must surely have provoked the former communist dictator Todor Zhivkov to spin in his grave, as several hundred liberals larged it in his villa, now a museum. Admiring its fixtures and architecture, it was noticeable that, no matter what sacrifices were required of workers to build Marxism-Leninism, these did not extend to the communist elite, who lived in the style of the English aristocracy.

LI's proceedings may have a touch of the student union about them, but the international links its congresses facilitate are quietly valuable to the global progress of liberalism.

Mark Smulian is a member of the Liberator Collective

PAPER MERCHANTS OR POLITICIANS?

Liberal Democrat leafletters can out-deliver anyone, but they will need a coherent message to move any further forward, even if that offends some people, says Jeremy Hargreaves

A few months ago, I spent some time campaigning in a rural seat which, despite high hopes, we had failed to take at the previous election. At one point, a number of members took me aside and confided to me their views on why this was.

"We delivered too many leaflets", they complained. "We shouldn't have produced tabloid newspapers" they explained "they're too downmarket." In the space of a few minutes, they attacked just about every successful local campaigning technique that the party has developed over the last 30 years.

I told them I didn't agree – that however much we might all prefer to sit at home instead of going out delivering in the rain, it was exactly doing this that had turned the tide in the decline of twentieth century liberalism, and seen us start to win seats again rather than lose them. Impatiently dismissing their innovative – and in one or two cases, extremely odd – suggestions for what we ought to do instead to win votes, I found myself saying "There is a formula, and it works".

And work it really does. The proof is in the thousands of council seats and dozens of parliamentary seats which the party has won in recent years, and which came about because of the sheer hard work which local campaigners have put in – often over many decades. We are bloody good at local campaigning, and it works.

The sheer power of local campaigning to move mountains is made most clear in by-elections. Somebody told me that, in the Brent East campaign, the Liberal Democrats delivered a million leaflets – somewhere around 120 for each vote that we won.

It's this kind of result which means that the success of local campaigning is so universally recognised within the party – and which is so widely feared by our opponents, both locally and in parliamentary by-elections.

But for those of us who believe in the sheer power of this kind local campaigning, the result on 5 May does throw up some conundrums.

For this time, the list of seats which we won had surprisingly little correlation to the seats where we had worked – which had followed the strict campaigning rules for how to win a target seat. Indeed, in a number of target seats where the local campaign had done everything by the book, and the candidate and campaign team had worked furiously hard day and night for months, in terms of votes we actually went backwards.

Conversely, in some inner city seats, where we ran no campaign to speak of at all, and the candidate was selected barely a matter of days before the campaign started, we enjoyed significant swings to us – sometimes of up to 12%.

How do we reconcile these outcomes in the cold light of a general election result, with the unarguable success of the local campaigning technique?

The explanation surely starts from the fact that, in a national election, most voters receive the vast majority of their information about what the election is about through the national (or at best regional) broadcast media and newspapers, which obviously focus on the national leaders and the parties' national political positioning. (And, until we as a party are able to produce several TV and radio channels and daily newspapers ourselves, this will remain the case!).

Unsurprisingly, therefore, most people decide how they are going to vote on the basis of what they have seen of the parties' overall national approach.

And – leaving aside the comparative advantage which our local campaigning brings us, which we are obviously right to pursue – it is surely right that voters should be making their choice on the basis of a party's political position, rather than on the basis of the fact that they have had more pieces of paper through their letterbox with our candidate's name on it than with our opponent's. Voting in a general election is, after all, supposed to be a political choice about which party and approach we want to govern the country for the next few years, not judging a contest in campaigning techniques.

So is intensive local campaigning, with lots of leaflets, surveys and press releases from a hardworking candidate and campaign team, a waste of time? Clearly, the evidence shows that it isn't.

But the lesson we should learn from this year's election is that, while effective local campaigning can make the very most of our potential in particular constituencies, the deciding factor for the great majority of voters is how they perceive a party's overall political position and approach.

Strong local campaigns are superb at tipping strong second places just over the edge into Lib Dem gains – winning us another 20 or 30 seats, or even 40 or 50 – but what will cause a mass turning of support to us – gaining us 100, 200 or 300 seats – is our overall political appeal.

This pitch, and our political positioning, is more than just an agglomeration of all our policies. At this general election, we had greater success than in the past in successfully communicating a wider range of our headline policies to the public.

But what voters told pollsters they found more difficult to perceive, was the underlying theme and overall political approach which underpinned our policies, which defined our approach.

Our key challenge for the next four years – and which more than anything else will determine how many seats we win at the next general election – is defining, and relentlessly communicating to the public, what it is that makes us different from the other parties – what our underlying approach is.

It is about the biggest picture. In 1979, Thatcher's appeal was that she would shake up the country's economy and industrial relations. In 1997, Blair's was to promise to take the government back for the people from the sleaze-ridden and out of touch Tories. What will our appeal be in 2009? Will we promise to cut tax or raise it? Will we want to increase the role of the state in citizens' personal lives, or reduce it?

I have my own views on what our answers – and indeed the questions – should be. But that's not really the point. These are the kinds of questions that we need to be answering. And as we do it, we need to do it clearly and boldly.

Too often, one of the consequences of Liberal Democrats being less obnoxious than many of our political opponents, is that we want to keep everyone happy. This is a lovely idea – but in practice it means that too many of our positions and policies appeal only to the lowest common denominator. We are so determined at all costs to avoid having a disagreement on anything significant at conference (or for that matter anywhere else) that too often we end up saying nothing political at all. For the same reason that nobody really disagrees with a lot of our positions, nobody really much agrees with them either – because they don't really say anything.

If we are to make progress, we have to be prepared to take a different approach. We need to get used to defining clear political choices and then jumping off the fence as we plump firmly for one rather than the other, instead of always using our undoubted skills for finding a compromise.

We have to take a clear decision about what our overall political approach is, and then spend the next four years ensuring that our policies flow from that. As well as making our policies more consistent across different areas, more importantly this will answer the question that the electorate is asking: what, underneath it all, do you stand for? Voters are more interested in this than our specific proposals for how we would regulate the widget industry – and given that a general election is a choice about which group of people and ideas will run the country, they are right to be.

Answering it and defining a clear overall political approach will hopefully make some people happy – but it will make others, including some within our own party, unhappy. But to put this in terms of our discussions at conference – which must be the forum where we thrash this out – it is more important that most of the people in the hall are happy, and some are unhappy, than that both groups, plus the journalists, are so uninterested in the whole thing that they are in the bar instead.

All this is quite a significant cultural shift for us as a party.

Among other things, as we put our political position to the fore, we need to be prepared to back this with up resources. At all levels of the party, we are all inclined to think that, because no-one reads our policy papers, any spare money that comes our way, say, should be put into employing a campaigns organiser rather than someone to work on policy or politics. I'm the last person to suggest that more detailed policy papers are what we need – but if it is how clearly we define our political position, and how hard we ram it down people's throats that will determine our success at the next election, then that surely needs to be the priority for resources too.

If we do this, and do it right, we can raise our eyes from the near horizons of whether this or that seat that we ought to have taken years ago will finally fall next time, and be more ambitious.

After all, building on our result this May, if we can persuade just another one or two voters in ten that they like our political position, we will at last be in a position to put our ideas into practice.

Jeremy Hargreaves is a member of the Liberal Democrats' Meeting the Challenge policy working group

THE LION WHO MARCHED TO GUNFIRE

Jo Grimond languished for decades with no biography, but now two have appeared within three years. Michael Steed assesses Peter Barberis's new account of the leader who revived the Liberal Party

This is the biography of the former Liberal leader for which we have waited too long.

It is strange that, in the quarter century between Jo's retirement from the Liberal leadership and his death in 1993, no biography appeared (his own 1979 memoirs were more a rambling reminiscence than an account of his political career). Strange because, among those in my generation and slightly older who had been inspired by his leadership, there were plenty capable of writing one; strange, too, since the claim that he was responsible for rescuing the Liberal Party from extinction (if true, no small achievement) was regularly repeated.

Then, it seems, two biographers set out to work in parallel. Michael McManus beat Peter Barberis to the publishing deadline and what Barberis condescendingly calls "Michael McManus's offering" came out in Autumn 2001.

Barberis states that he read his rival only after he had nearly completed his own offering; I find that entirely believable, as Barberis's book shows all the signs of more thorough and painstaking preparation than McManus's.

Inevitably one must compare the two. McManus provides a longer, more comprehensive story of a man's life; in total, McManus offers nearly twice as many words as Barberis. However, the footnote ratio and a much longer bibliography weigh in Barberis's favour. There can be no doubt that Barberis has spent more time immersed in sources and political history; he has come up with a more considered and helpfully structured piece of work. This is the biography for the academic political historian.

What of the general reader or Liberal activist? In McManus's favour, the more personal episodes in Jo's life receive a great deal more attention, and those wanting the feel of a politician's life may well find it a better read.

Thus Jo's marriage into a Liberal dynasty is treated rather differently. McManus reveals that Jo courted two of Asquith's granddaughters, going out with Cressida Bonham Carter before he married her younger sister Laura, and speculates on how and why Laura and Jo were better suited than Cressida and Jo. Barberis only mentions Cressida for later marrying a friend of Jo's. He explores Jo and Laura's political and social compatibility, but does not delve into the personal side of their courtship. However, he alone records a fascinating and instructive aside: Donald Maclean, son of a former leading Liberal MP and later a Soviet spy, had also courted Laura Bonham Carter.

Another personal episode in Grimond's life is similarly treated rather differently. His son Andrew's suicide during the 1966 general election campaign can hardly be ignored by a biographer. Barberis says all that is strictly necessary about this tragedy, its place in that election campaign and its effect on Jo, in one succinct paragraph. That includes quoting one of Jo's surviving sons pointing out how difficult Jo found it to discuss affections and emotions (like, one might add, so many boys of his generation who went through a 'privileged' but emotionally-crippling public-school education).

In contrast, McManus offers us a three-page blow-by-blow account of how the episode unfolded, not unduly intrusive, both with reflections on how the press and other politicians handled the matter and an attempt to place Andrew's putative mental illness in the context of attitudes prevalent at the time. His account is not only more comprehensive but also more interesting for his sense of how such a tragedy could occur. Andrew Grimond's suicide was one of several by the children of prominent politicians at that period.

However, I do wonder about the way that McManus makes his confident judgments about Jo Grimond. On the key question of the significance of his political life, he is clear that Jo did save the Liberal Party. He is oblivious to the electoral history that contradicts this, and makes psephological howlers. Barberis does not deal seriously with the electoral track record, but, looking at the broader historical context, states firmly that, if any individual saved the Liberal Party, "it was Clement Davies rather than Jo Grimond". I agree; the party had come closest to dying during Davies's decade of leadership and was clearly already on the way back up by the time Jo took over.

That still leaves Jo Grimond a highly significant figure in the history of the Liberal Party. In 1956, Jo was the only conceivable next leader because the electoral system and chance meant there was no other remotely serious candidate among Liberal MPs, and the party was unable to contemplate

an extra-parliamentary leader. However, if electoral fate had been slightly kinder to the Liberal Party in the early 1950s, there were several others (notably Frank Byers) who could have succeeded Clement Davies. Did the fact that Jo was leading the party as it grew in strength make a difference?

Neither Barberis nor McManus answer exactly that question, but both offer a biographical interpretation highly relevant to it. Both fully appreciate Jo Grimond as a man of political ideas, to a degree non-existent among party leaders today and pretty rare in the last century. That was a key part of his attraction, of how with so few tangible resources he brought the Liberal Party back from the fringe of British politics, and of his enduring achievement. Jo Grimond undoubtedly left his mark on the party: he attracted the fresh generation needed to rebuild it. Most of those who led the Liberal Party at any level of government by the 1980s had been inspired by him.

So what were those ideas? I get the feeling that both Barberis and McManus have some difficulty in pinning down the answer to that question - as I do. Yet they offer rather different answers.

Here, I believe, Michael McManus was led astray both by his own political stance and the bias of readily available sources. Basically a Heathite Tory, he was looking for connections between Grimond's ideas and his own; he found them mainly in Jo's later writings. It is easy to forget that nearly half of Jo's Commons career came after he retired from the party leadership at 53; by then he felt exhausted by that role's demands and needed a break. But there was a ready market for the elder statesman's musings, and Jo was still full of ideas. However, in this period, which Barberis calls his "twilight", Jo wrote so much that was opaque that almost any politically-minded biographer could have found some link with their own ideas.

It says much for Peter Barberis's more professional approach that, after reading his book, I was left without a clear view of his own political outlook. He sees Jo's early life as the key to his development. Although Grimond came from a provincial upper-middle-class Liberal family, politics did not run in the family. There is, therefore, a lot of an emphasis on who he mixed with at Eton and Oxford, and on which political thinkers inspired him. The social liberal philosopher T.H. Green is singled out, linking Jo Grimond directly back to the ferment of ideas at the end of the Gladstonian era.

Jo did not get involved in Oxford Union politics but, while at Oxford, had already decided he wanted to become a Liberal politician. This unconventional route to a political career also meant standing out against the fashionable Marxism of his generation of Oxbridge graduates, and ignoring the careerist imperative which offered an easy route to high office to someone of his educational background and eloquence via the Conservative Party.

This decision naturally led the young London barrister to mix with the metropolitan intellectual Liberal circles of the mid-1930s (whence his marriage into a Liberal dynasty), and into seeking a Liberal parliamentary candidature. It reads more like recruitment into politics through a Whig connection than a modern political career. It took Jo to what was almost a throwback, a constituency of traditional island communities little touched by mid-20th century political class conflict. Barberis emphasises how the Orkney and Zetland constituency both fitted and formed Jo Grimond's socio-economic outlook. It was an extraordinarily happy and apt political alliance.

Serving first in the short 1950/51 parliament, Jo's immediate political engagements were developed by certain key issues. In that parliament, Liberal MPs, Jo particularly, stood out for their support for the Schumann plan and the welcome they gave to the European federalist ideal (something McManus does not appreciate).

Liberal MPs also fought with few allies against the agreement by the Attlee government to rubber-stamp the racist South African government's insistence on exiling the Bechuanaland leader, Seretse Khama, for the 'offence' of marrying a white woman; Grimond, although still a new MP, took a leading role in this campaign. Unlike Barberis, McManus ignores this significant, formative episode in Jo's career.

By the time he took up the leadership in 1956, Jo's instinctive internationalism fitted the times well. His message about Britain's role in the world, with its emphasis on the need to join Europe and to move away from Britain's traditional imperial fixation, sounded wonderfully modern; Macmillan and Gaitskell were both fixated on a greatness that was past. His noises about domestic economic issues sounded so much more contemporary than the sterile Conservative/Labour battle over nationalisation. His deep concerns about community and participation presaged the priorities of the 1960s.

He stood out from other politicians with his lack of respect for establishment conventions; his swingeing attack on the honours system in 1958 (which stung the normally reticent Attlee into a response) could be applied to the way that Blair governs today. His concept of what was progressive, and his understanding of the reactionary forces that progressives faced, chimed in with the post-1945 political debate at a time when other politicians seemed bogged down in pre-1939 arguments.

Yet, as Barberis repeatedly shows, the fresh-sounding relevance of what he said during his decade as leader reflected the values of his upbringing and early political development as well as tapping the philosophic roots of late-Gladstonian liberalism.

Jo Grimond's life and achievement is a wonderful metaphor for the enduring relevance and continuity of Liberal ideas. Peter Barberis's concise account of his political career has done it justice.

Michael Steed is a former president of the Liberal Party, who became active in the party in the second year of Jo Grimond's leadership

Liberal Lion Jo Grimond: a Political Life, by Peter Barberis (I.B. Tauris).
Jo Grimond: Towards the Sound of Gunfire, by Michael McManus (Birlinn).

OFF THE FENCE

Roughly one-third of voters will always vote Tory, so what point is there in the Liberal Democrats trying to chase them, asks Guy Burton

I don't know about the party leadership, but my backside is getting sore from all this sitting on the fence over the last four years. It's time for a rethink – and I don't mean in terms of shifting from one buttock to the other either.

After the last election, the leadership decided upon a strategy which sought to steal seats off both Labour and the Tories in equal measure. It seemed a like a return to equidistance after the long years of the Blair-Ashdown 'Project'. But all it served to do was to blur the edges around the party, making it seem fuzzier than before.

It's all very well saying voters should look at the policies and see the difference we're offering. But, unlike Lib Dems, most voters are not lovers of policy detail. Most go on gut instinct, either projecting what they want to see on politicians (otherwise how else to explain disillusioned Labour voters believing there's a substantive difference between Tony Blair and Gordon Brown?) or identifying with one particular policy decision above all others (Iraq anyone?).

How many voters failed to identify one clear difference between ourselves and our opponents? According to analysis by the BBC's editor of political research, David Cowling, Iraq was integral in the shift of voters from Labour to Lib Dem. But Iraq, important as it was, was unique. We can't guarantee that such a unique factor will occur in this parliament.

On the one substantive policy difference in the election, local income tax, we got hammered time and again. The trouble stemmed – surprising given our political aspirations – by our honesty. Any voter could calculate the amount they would pay in tax on the party website and discover how much more they would pay. It made for an opposition shooting season in which the Lib Dems were the ducks.

Even more frustrating, it was all predictable. During my own GLA election campaign last year, several voters admitted being put off by the prospect of paying higher taxes. And if my own experience wasn't enough, defeated PPCs Sue Doughty and Charles Anglin also made the same point on the BBC's *Today* programme.

More worrying, though, was Ed Davey's response on *Today*. When invited to perform some public soul searching, he declined. Apparently all we need to do is make one more heave and we'll break through. But we didn't, and the assumption that the Tories will remain fixated on immigration – as Ed seemed to think – is not enough. We need to start thinking about the party's future strategy (and its relation to party policy) – and hard.

We took 12 seats from Labour but that was expected; after eight years of government, there would be something wrong if an opposition party wasn't able to capitalise, especially with difficulties over Iraq. In Tory-Lib Dem contests we did less well, not picking up as many target seats as we hoped. Although we gained three, we managed to lose five others. Similarly, the high-profile campaign to beat leading Tories, like Oliver Letwin, Teresa May, David Davis and Michael Howard, didn't work. The Tories have continued to flat-line at around a third of the voting electorate since 1997, suggesting that they have hit their core vote.

Indeed, it's worthwhile asking whether there is anything more to be gained by putting Lib Dems in blue suits in Tory areas. It won't wash, either within the party or among the party's voters. According to Sheffield University's Paul Whitely and Patrick Seyd, who have placed party members along a left-right ideological spectrum, Lib Dem and Labour members tend to identify themselves as on the left-hand side of the scale and closer to each other than do the Tories. Meanwhile the 2005 general election results suggest that the electoral base of the Tory party shows there is a conservative vote out there which will never vote for anyone other than the Tories. What political advantage is to be gained by the Lib Dems becoming another conservative party?

If anything, the shift in trends before and since 1997 indicates that Lib Dems have far more to gain by targeting Labour. The leftward search for votes avoids the internal wrenching of the party – witness the mass desertion of Labour voters since Blair's first triumph – while targeting Lib Dem resources. Whereas the Tories draw their support from older voters and the lower-middle and working class, Labour and Lib Dems have tended to do better with the young and middle class. In fact the erosion of Labour support in 2005 points to a political space which the Lib Dems are best placed to tap into – if they get the strategy and policies right.

In other words, despite our fence-sitting, voters generally agree with the Sheffield University findings and put Lib Dems to the left of Labour. So rather than reject that assumption, let's embrace it. Let's pursue an approach which emphasises that dimension, especially our commitment to social justice and equity. And let's do it before Gordon Brown seizes it, if he replaces Blair.

But before anyone throws away this *Liberator* in disgust, let me stress that I'm not arguing for a return to a version of the 1970s statist model so beloved of Old Labour types. To give an example of the boundaries of this position, a month before the election I found myself sitting – against my better judgment – through a Demos debate on the prospects for a Labour third term.

The uniformed men of New Labour – identified by their dark designer suits and frameless letter-box glasses – were adamant about the need to bring in the market to public services. Indeed, they were in the ascendancy, putting the main speaker for the Old Labour tendency, the Britpop chronicler and author of *Who Do I Vote For?*, John Harris, on

the defensive. The problem for Harris though was his inability to articulate an alternative vision of well-funded public services without some hard-headed discussion about where the resources would come, either through taxation and expenditure increases or efficiency-led reallocation.

Notwithstanding those choices, one theme that Harris was able to clearly identify was the importance of a greater role for the state. But how this is to be achieved is open to debate. Indeed, at an Oxford University seminar I attended in late May on the comparative structure of public-private partnerships in Britain and Brazil, the convenor, Juarez Freitas, argued that the Brazilian model was more rigid and legally stricter with the private sector. In part, this may be attributed to the lateness of the PPP process in a country like Brazil, where lessons have been learned from earlier experiences, including here. But it may also be the case that the current left-of-centre government in Brasilia has been more inclined to increase the weight of the state.

These substantive differences raise questions for the left-of-centre in our country. The current Labour party and government appear disinclined to press for the kind of state necessary to balance the competing demands of citizen and society, public and private sectors. Consequently there is a political space to exploit, an opportunity to build a genuinely social democrat party which will address the challenges of contemporary Britain.

But choosing social democracy doesn't mean opting for the politically ambiguous New Labour model which so quickly fell out of fashion after 1997. Despite his association with the project, Anthony Giddens was onto something when he coined the Third Way during that period. It was only regrettable that commentators focused on his early analysis of the challenges facing modern societies, his relationship with Blair and overlooked subsequent material on social democracy (both in the UK and abroad), thereby further discrediting reasonable discussion of the country's main political challenges.

Social democratic challenges are wide-ranging and need a more joined-up approach beyond simply the green initiatives which have become commonplace in our manifestos. How are we to grapple with the problems of contemporary Britain when the state's relationship to society is so fragmented and unorganised? How do we tackle the challenges of globalisation in a coherent and structured manner? To what extent should the private sector be allowed to engage in the public sector and how can we ensure that it is both complementary, yet places the public interest first and foremost? These are all big questions that deserve discussion and that have broadly been overlooked by the Blair-Brown nexus. Consequently, I'm happy to see Charles Kennedy say that he wants a policy review. But if it's going to happen we must also consider the direction the party will take to address these challenges.

In May, Liberator collective member Simon Titley made a good point on his blog. As a principle, he didn't have a problem with a policy review, but he did reject the idea of discarding policies for their own sake. In other words, while Lib Dem activists shouldn't get too precious about the detail of particular policies (e.g. the local income tax), neither should the leadership presume that scrapping a particular policy commitment will resolve the issue. Pursuing the latter will do little to enhance the party's credibility, as we've seen with the Tories following the adoption of some incoherent policies; the contradiction between parental school choice and free university tuition springs to mind.

But the Lib Dem leadership will need to do more than simply ape the Tories. It may seem almost fantastical to believe it ever happened but, shortly after the 2001 General Election, a book came out that with hindsight may well be seen as the last hurrah of 'The Project'. *The Progressive Century* was jointly edited by Labour's Neal Lawson and the Lib Dems' Neil Sherlock and included contributions from both academics and leading politicians from the two parties. The main premise was that both parties shared common core values and should strive to produce political, economic and social institutions which best reflected those goals.

Although the volume suffered from vaguely worded aspirations by many of its contributors, it did have some important issues to address. Indeed, among the most pertinent – particularly in the current Lib Dem discussion of policy reviews – came from the sociologist, Michael Rustin. Although he was writing about the attributes of a left-of-centre government, they could also be applied to similar parties too. In particular, he stressed the importance of identifying "boundaries between market and government, between public and private spheres, [and] between competing ethics and different views." Only if governments and parties listened to and understood the concerns of others who didn't share their views would confidence and trust in the decision-making process return.

In the context of the promised policy review, that must mean the Lib Dems take a principled approach. That must therefore mean an open and frank discussion and consideration of the way in which each policy will either maximise or limit social justice. By doing this, the party can meet the leadership's strategic goal: the image of a party seeking to make itself a credible opposition.

After 2001, the party leadership quickly shut down discussion of party strategy, opting for an all-things-to-all-men style. That's the way to maintain the common identification of Lib Dems as a party of protest. But next time around it simply won't work. If we want to be seen as a real alternative, we need to ditch our fuzziness and strike out a distinctive route. Voters need a clearer idea about what we stand for. We can partly achieve it through the policies we pursue; but if we're to make them all hang together, we need to make it clear how they all hang together. Otherwise we risk seeing a repeat of 2005 at the next election and kissing goodbye to our hopes of becoming both the main opposition party and future government-in-waiting.

Guy Burton was Liberal Democrat Greater London Assembly candidate for City and London East in 2004. He is researching the development and manifestations of social democracy.

OBITUARY: PATSY CALTON

Mark Hunter pays tribute to the late Liberal Democrat MP for Cheadle

Local Liberal Democrats have lost a much-loved friend and inspiration, and Cheadle has lost one of its greatest champions.

Patsy Calton's death from cancer has had a profound effect on all of us who admired her energy and her courage, not just during her illness, but in healthier times too.

Having spoken to Patsy only a few days earlier, I knew how determined she was to get back to representing Cheadle in Parliament and how – as ever – she would not let her illness get in the way of getting the job done. Patsy always wanted to prove that, despite illness, people could still fulfil their ambitions. She certainly achieved that aim.

But Patsy's qualities as a person and as an MP are not defined only by the courage and commitment she displayed during her illness. Throughout the many years I knew her, Patsy was an inspiration and great servant of the community in so many other ways too.

I first knew Patsy as a member of Stockport Council, where she represented West Bramhall between 1994 and 2002. During this time, she became chair of the social services committee and deputy leader of the Liberal Democrat group. As a councillor, she displayed all the qualities that would go on to make her a first-rate parliamentarian. She was always on top of the issues, with a firm grasp of policy and detail and, more importantly, she fought tirelessly to get things done locally for the benefit of residents and visitors. To many of us, it was only a matter of time before she would get the opportunity to display those skills at a national level.

Having been elected as MP for Cheadle in 2001 with a famously small majority, Patsy quickly established herself as a parliamentarian of great energy, enthusiasm and tenacity. And, during her four years as an MP, Patsy proved that she was one of very few politicians who could genuinely bridge the gap between local campaigner and national politician. She came closer than most to giving politicians a good name.

Outside politics, the four London marathons she completed to raise money for cancer charities embodied her tireless enthusiasm and energy. And among a large number of other local charities, voluntary groups and community organisations, she was an extraordinarily popular campaigner and champion. It was impossible to be in her presence for more than a few minutes and not understand just how important her work as an MP was to her.

Patsy was always a 'happy warrior' on the political stage, enjoying every bit of the challenge, whether fighting for the constituents she so ably represented in Parliament, or battling political opponents. Her steely determination was always evident and her sense of humour never far away.

Patsy's life should be celebrated. She achieved so much for so many people and I count myself lucky to have met and worked with her. It is impossible to put into words how sadly she will be missed by us all, and our thoughts and prayers go to her family.

Mark Hunter is the leader of Stockport Council and Liberal Democrat candidate in the Cheadle by-election.

LETTERS

WHAT LIT DID TO GUILDFORD

Dear Liberator,

Your remarks about the loss of Guildford (Liberator 302) are a bit wide of the mark. We didn't blame local income tax for the loss of this seat - all we said was that the policy needs to be carefully packaged and presented in the south east generally, when dual-income households among the electorate are quite common, unlike much of the rest of the country.

With the very high cost of living locally, a teacher, postal worker or shelf filler has a much lower level of disposable income.

In many households, both partners in a family must work full time to pay the mortgage, despite high child care costs. Accordingly, although there are some clear winners under our proposals, a joint income of over £50,000 in the south east would not go very far in meeting basic housing costs. We do need to ensure that such people are not categorized as affluent. I hope that our policy review will test the impact of policy and its presentation not only on an average or median household, but also on its impact on different areas. It was the experience not only of my team but of other PPCs in the area that LIT was a clear winner for some households, but we had to fight hard to make the case as we canvassed.

In fact, my vote increased by nearly 2,000 (from 20,358 in 2001 to 22,248 in 2005), a figure which is higher than that for two-thirds of sitting MPs. Unfortunately, the Tories poured masses of external resources into their campaign, increasing their vote by even more (19,820 in 2001 to 22,595 in 2005), while the decision of the Green Party to stand in 2005 - they had not done so in 2001 - cost me up to 800 votes, which is more than the current Tory majority of 347. As a Green Liberal Democrat, I find their decision difficult to understand.

Your column also comments on "disorganisation" at our Guildford campaign HQ. As your readers will know, the organisation within any campaign HQ in the throes of a fierce campaign is not immediately apparent to an outside visitor, and with benefit of hindsight some of the on-the-spot decisions made at the time at one location might have been different.

My team was well organized, we delivered and canvassed more than ever before and I would certainly pay tribute to the brilliant effort by Munira Hassam who will go far in the party.

Guildford is still a target seat - a Tory majority of a wafer-thin 347 will be difficult for them to defend - and I would urge all Liberator readers to put Guildford firmly in their sights for the next general election campaign

Sue Doughty
Liberal Democrat MP
Guildford 2001-05

PATENT NONSENSE

Dear Liberator,

Liberal Democrat MEPs seem intent to vote against party policy and allow patents on computer programming methods ('software patents'), something that would have savage repercussions for software development, economic growth and innovation.

A European Parliamentary committee recently voted on a proposed directive on so-called "computer-implemented inventions", which in its current form would legalize such patents. Despite being aware of party policy, Diana Wallis led the committee's liberal group, which held the swing votes, to vote down amendments which would prevent software patents.

The European Parliament as a whole will vote on the proposal on 6 July. Amendments must be supported by an absolute majority of all MEPs to pass. Most centre-right MEPs are likely to vote to allow software patents, while the left will mostly vote to amend the directive — so liberal MEPs will once again hold the balance of power.

Although most liberal MEPs seem to be instinctively against software patents, the liberal group also includes some of the European Parliament's most vocal and extreme supporters of patent inflation.

Liberal Democrat MEPs, led by Diana Wallis and Sharon Bowles, have so far sided with this unrepresentative group.

If this directive is passed unamended, the European IT sector will be devastated as large American and Japanese companies, which between them hold 75% of European software patents, will be able to sue their European competitors out of existence. This will entrench existing software monopolies, reduce consumer choice and kill independent software development. To oppose software patents is surely a natural liberal position. We therefore ask all Liberal Democrat MEPs to vote in line with party policy on July 6, to keep software patents out of the EU.

Alex Macfie
Thomas Kibasi, vice president, LYMEC (European Liberal Youth)
Alan Window, Chair, Liberal Democrats Online
...and 13 other signatories.

Cheadle by-election
14 July 2005
Help Mark Hunter to hold Cheadle for the Liberal Democrats.
Campaign headquarters
1st floor Tudor House
Woodford Road
Bramhall
Stockport SK7 2DG
Tel: 0161-439 9730.
Remember – only 33 votes in it in 2001

Lord Bonkers' Diary

Monday

High summer in Rutland: hamwee calls to hamwee, and wheway to wheway, across the broad valley of the Welland; Meadowcroft quite disappears amidst his foxgloves and hollyhocks, and I fancy I can hear the faint music of the elves of Rockingham Forest on the honeysuckle-scented breeze; Ruttie basks on the sandy shores of Rutland Water. I, however, can join her for only the briefest of sojourns, as I am busy supervising preparations for our summer fete. All our favourite stalls will be there – Pin the Tail on the Oldham PPC, Guess the Weight of the Elephant (Nancy insists it is the same every year, but one does wonder) – as well as the Fancy Dress Contest, of course. I have a fitting of my scarecrow costume this afternoon and decide to wear it around the village for a few days to make sure that it does not chafe anywhere.

Tuesday

I tear myself away from this hive of activity to attend the latest meeting of Liberals Against Choice. The topic this afternoon is education, and the speaker describes how children will choose their secondary schools under a Liberal Democrat Government: apparently their parents will receive a letter from the local School Selection Officer informing them of the school to which they have been assigned. When I ask if this will be popular I am assured that people will stop to shake the Officer's hand in the street and that spontaneous choruses of "Thank you, Comrade School Selection Officer" will break out wherever he, or indeed she, goes. Really, it reminds me of my old trips to Eastern Europe: then the Secretary of the Party would announce that "In Vulgaria all schools are of the highest quality so there is no need for choice" and applause would break our for three hours. It took a snootful or two of the local cabbage vodka to get through that, I can tell you.

Wednesday

Strolling down to the Bonkers' Arms, I am accosted by the occupants of an expensive motor that draws up beside me. "We're looking for a ghastly little place called York. Do you know it?" drawls one voice. "Is one nearly there yet?" and "He must be the village idiot. How sweet!" add others. It transpires that these dreadful types are lost on their way to Royal Ascot, which the authorities have had the good sense to hold on the Knavesmire this year. Unfortunately, the geography of England north of the Chilterns proves a mystery to those educated at our more expensive private schools, and carloads of their kind turn up throughout the day in the most unlikely places: stranded in the duck pond, rammed into a haystack and endlessly circling the roundabout at the commencement of the Uppingham bypass. I have the chickens turned out of the Egyptian Dining Room at the Hall and put these people up for the night after first inviting them to make a modest contribution to the Well-Behaved Orphans' Christmas Treat Fund.

Thursday

My old friend Andrew "Plum" Duff has been down in the dumps since his cherished constitution was given the thumbs down by the people of France and the Netherlands, so I treat him to dinner at the Club this evening to cheer him up. Over the brandies he divests himself of the opinion that the French and Dutch are "an odd bunch of racists, xenophobes, nationalists, communists, disappointed centre-left and the generally pissed-off." I counsel him gently that, although foreigners seem funny to us, many of them are decent chaps In Their Own Way and that if this European business upon which he is so keen is to be a going concern, he will have to learn to put up with them.

Friday

Thinking over yesterday's dinner, I take to my Library to write an article on the Common Agricultural Policy. Did you know that each European cow is subsidised to the tune of $3 a day? As a Liberal I insist that this money is paid directly to the beasts themselves, and that has made a great difference to the rural economy in these parts with many cows now owning their owns sheds, running small businesses and enjoying holidays abroad. I also touch upon the topic of "set aside": this year I am not growing barley, but in past years I have not grown more exotic crops such as linseeds and lupins. Indeed, people would drive for miles to look at the brightly coloured flowers not growing amid the green fields of Rutland.

Saturday

The day of the fete dawns bright and the jolliest of times is had by all. The blacksmith and his sons defeat a scratch team of would-be Ascot racegoers to win the Tug of War. (Incidentally, the racegoers are also persuaded to fill the breach when the Formula One teams refuse to take part in the Rutland Grand Prix over some footling "safety" objection or other – I do hope none of them is too seriously injured, but the rapids do take some getting used to in a racing car.) The coconut shy, the cake stall and the dog show are all well received, and the remaining racegoers take an understandable interest in the Donkey Derby, even if the finer points of our Rutland betting law prove beyond them. And the Fancy Dress Contest? I do not like to mention it, but it happens that I win it myself – quite a number of the children whom I beat into runners up spots weep tears of joy at this outcome.

Sunday

I drop into the Vicarage before Divine Service to have a quiet word with the Reverend Hughes. Admirable padre though he is, he can get carried away once he has the bit between his teeth – there are those who have still not forgiven him for burning those Social Democrats at the stake – and, what with the current legislative climate, I advise him to exercise caution in this morning's sermon. Unfortunately, he will not be told and gives us both barrels of John 8:34 "Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of…" At this point the police burst in and arrest the Revd Hughes for inciting hatred of Satanists. Though I am on hand to fill the breach with a few observations on Free Trade, this does cast rather a damper over proceedings.

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

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www.bonkers.hall.btinternet.co.uk