

liberator



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COMMENTARY

ONE FRONT OR TWO?

If perception is reality, then the Conservative party has changed.

This does not mean that the Tories have actually changed, merely that enough of the public believe it to have given them a consistent opinion poll lead.

That amounts to much the same thing, whatever the Tories truly believe or would actually do in power. A large part of the public thinks the Tories have repositioned themselves somewhere in the soggy centre of politics, just as Labour did a decade ago, and that is enough to make this perception a political reality.

This poses a long-absent problem for the Liberal Democrats – how to both fight a government and compete with another opposition party.

Apart from the run-up to 1992, the Lib Dems and their predecessors have had the luxury of some 30 years during which one or other of the Tory or Labour parties has been effectively out of action due to public disgust.

The tide that took out the Tories has turned and the one that bore Labour in has not yet wholly turned back, which means a fight on two fronts.

Past experience suggests this is an unpromising set of circumstances, but is it really a fight on two fronts, or one?

Labour and the Tories have both been through defeat and reinvention as the voices of Middle England, to the extent that hardly anything of importance now divides them.

Whether it is the Iraq war, 'tough' posturing on law and order, demolition of civil liberty, sucking up to George Bush, privatising public services, sullen obstruction in Europe, nuclear energy or centralisation of power, the Labour and Tory positions are so close that a grand coalition between them looks the most logical outcome of any hung parliament.

Labour moved steadily into traditional Tory territory as soon as Blair became leader, and Cameron now seems to have decided that his party can best return to power by looking and sounding like Labour but without having its widely-hated leader.

Far from worrying about how to fight a new challenge from the Tories, the Lib Dems need only keep up the critique they have of Labour and they can attack two enemies for the price of one.

The list of subjects above on which Labour and the Tories substantially agree are all ones where the Lib Dems occupy different, defensible and distinctive positions that resonate with a large slice of public opinion.

How to express them, when and to whom are all areas of legitimate debate, but the party ought to have little to fear from fighting a Labour/Tory consensus that is locked in the politics of the 1980s.

What the Lib Dems have to fear are voices in their own ranks who believe that the way to fight in the face of such a consensus is to become part of it.

There are those who believe the future lies in sounding more like the other two parties on crime, taxation, defence, public services and Europe, and that stepping outside the Labour/Tory consensus would be suicide.

What would be suicidal for the Lib Dems is to become a part of that consensus, and thus indistinguishable to the public from the other two occupants of that narrow territory.

Those who advocate that course are a worse menace to the Lib Dems than is anyone in any other party.

MINDLESS ACTIVISM

Why does the prime minister not simply appoint the editor of the News of the World to the post of home secretary and have done with it?

The spectacle of the government allowing a newspaper to dictate its policy on crime would be funny were it not so serious, because of what it says about Labour's debased condition.

This government has been in power for nine years. It has passed more than forty new laws to tinker with the criminal justice system, usually as piecemeal responses to some media campaign or passing moral panic rather than as a coherent attempt to improve anything.

When its unprincipled populism has failed, or simply created other problems, it resorts to more laws and more tinkering.

The only coherence behind it, if it can be dignified as such, is an attempt to subordinate the entire police, legal and justice systems to the whims of politicians.

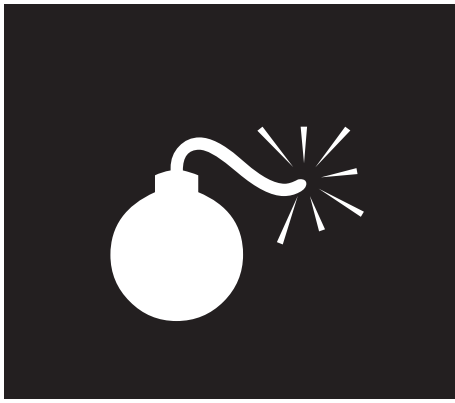
There is no aspect to the legal process in which Labour ministers do not see fit to interfere in the interests of getting a favourable headline in the right-wing press, regardless of what long-term damage may be done.

Lawyers, judges, even senior police officers, have protested that Labour's endless and mindless interference is both wrong in principle and counter-productive in practice.

But no-one should be surprised. New Labour's hallmark from the beginning was that it believed in nothing except gaining and holding power – all short term tactics and no long-term vision or even intentions.

The chickens are coming home to roost, but along the way civil liberty is under the most sustained peacetime attack it has ever endured in modern Britain.

Defence of civil liberty is the distinctive position the Liberal Democrats should take, rather than engage in a futile attempt to outbid the other two parties in the 'toughness' stakes.



RADICAL BULLETIN

SETTING THE AGENDA

There was a whiff of panic about Ming Campbell's speech on 8 June, in which he half launched half of the party's forthcoming tax proposals.

Campbell has suffered a barrage of poor publicity, much of it from normally sympathetic commentators, at his lack of impact as leader. The tax speech looked like an attempt to get him to say something controversial almost regardless of what that was.

The party's tax commission is yet to report, which leaves open the question of whether Campbell was voicing policies agreed by the commission, or using the speech to bounce it into a particular conclusion.

His speech was spun as a change in policy, backed up with some further spinning about how it might get voted down by activists at conference.

This looks like to classic set-up from the bad old days of David Steel, where the leader announces a policy position, lets it be known that he would feel humiliated if the conference were to reject it, and so forces the conference into line to avoid any such humiliation, real or imagined.

But there does seem to be some nervousness about the conference vote. A Guardian story on 15 June, citing no source, said there would be a separate vote at conference on retention of the 50p top tax rate, to avoid the row that would happen were this not on offer.

During the commission's deliberations, discussions on property tax versus local income tax found no consensus, so conference can look forward to full debate on that hardy perennial of land value taxation.

The 50p rate came under fire from those, usually personally wealthy, individuals who claimed it was ineffective because the wealthy would find ways to evade it.

Others made the ludicrous claim that it was a 'tax on aspiration', as though any significant number of people ever seriously aspire to earn such a sum.

The party now wants to lose the 50p rate and replace it with other taxes on 'the very wealthy'.

Have the Lib Dems hit on taxes so tightly drawn that the very wealthy cannot avoid them ñ where the best brains of the treasury and the tax profession have for decades failed?

Or do they just think that getting rid of the headline 50p rate, and making the rest of tax policy obscure and complicated, will mean that no-one bothers to enquire too closely what the party's policy comprises, whatever they aspire to?

ORANGES AND LEMONS

One problem with the *Orange Book*, in addition to what it said, was the timing of its publication, which overshadowed

the party's messages from its final autumn conference before the general election (*Liberator* 298).

The book's promoters are set to repeat this mistake by publishing a follow-up volume (*Tangerine Book?* *Satsuma Book?*) this September, detracting attention from the launch of *Meeting the Challenge*, which is intended to set the tone for the party's policy work and messages for the rest of this parliament.

The authors are said to be scared of attracting the same opprobrium that covered David Laws after his divisive launch of the original volume two years ago.

There is a simple solution ñ publish it at another time. Or perhaps the economic liberal lunatic fringe has concluded that *Meeting the Challenge* is insufficiently to its taste and resolved to wreck it?

IT'S THAT MAN AGAIN

The idea that a decent period of silence might be wise has not penetrated Mark Oaten.

Fresh from the scandals surrounding his sexual antics in January, he seems to be using his notoriety to develop a spin-off media career.

These appearances keep him and his conduct in the public eye and cannot be doing the party any good (*Liberator* 310).

Oaten's campaign kicked off with a column written in the *Sunday Times* (7 May), in which he made it look as if his leadership bid was a last-minute initiative which others had forced him into, when he had long been planning it.

From 22 May onwards, viewers of BBC2's lunchtime *Daily Politics* were treated to the sight of Oaten in grubby white shorts, appearing in a gym-based weekly feature on fitness for politicians.

What took the biscuit was a film Oaten made for BBC2's *Newsnight* (23 May), in which the thrust of his argument was that all politicians have self-destructive personalities, but that he'd now moved above them by coming to terms with it.

In an e-newsletter on 26 May, *Newsnight's* editor Peter Barron reported that "until the afternoon of the day of broadcast we hoped that Mr Oaten would be prepared to answer Jeremy [Paxman]'s questions off the back of the film, but sadly that didn't come to pass.

"Looking back at it now, what would I have done differently? I would still have done it, and would still have led with it, but I think now that we should have gone to Martha Kearney off the back and asked: 'What do you make of that then?' and then we could have explained to open-mouthed viewers the circumstances under which the film was made."

Meanwhile, there appears to be no stopping Oaten. He appeared on the panel of BBC1's *Question Time* on 14 June.

Every time Oaten appears in the national media, he reminds voters of past scandals, and this cannot be any help to his constituency party in Winchester in particular.

Oaten has declined to make his intentions at the next election known yet, and even if local members wished to deselect him, party rules prevent this until two years after a general election.

Thus Winchester is in limbo, though many local members believe it needs a new, and preferably female, candidate to hold the seat.

IT'S THAT MAN AGAIN (2)

The PR mastermind behind Mark Oaten's current media barrage is said to be Gavin Grant, who also played a leading role in Oaten's doomed leadership campaign (*Liberator* 309) and who has among other accomplishments acted professionally as a consultant to the Iraqi National Congress.

Meanwhile, it has been decided that Ming Campbell needs an image makeover. The *Daily Telegraph* (24 June) reported that, among the public relations experts called in to help run a 'campaign to reinvent Sir Menzies' is none other than Gavin Grant.

Improving Campbell's image should prove easy for someone who has dealt with Mark Oaten and Ahmed Chalabi.

AN OPEN GOAL

Relations between the parliamentary parties at Westminster and Brussels seem to be as non-existent as ever, judging by attempts by former European Parliament leader Chris Davies to get Ming Campbell to take an initiative over open government.

Austrian minister Hans Winkler told the European Parliament (14 June) that his country would "fight to the very last moment" to secure adoption of his openness and transparency agenda at the European Summit, which opened the following day, but had implied that Tony Blair was likely to oppose this and that Britain was the only real obstacle to increased openness.

Davies suggested that Campbell should get some positive coverage by challenging Blair over the issue in an open letter that day.

He was less than pleased to be told: "Ming is approving the draft. His press focus today, however, remains the follow up from PMQs on nuclear energy since Blair slipped up in response. Thus, this will go to the press tomorrow."

Davies replied: "The plans are going to be discussed informally by prime ministers tomorrow night, so any attempt to use this letter [later] to stoke up press interest and apply pressure to achieve change will be wasted.

"This is something here and now where we can make a difference. The problems of nuclear power are going to be around long after we are all dead."

UNCLEAR DETERRENCE

The Lib Dems have a working group examining whether the Trident nuclear weapon system should be replaced, and if so with what.

This was set up in some haste and with little fanfare by the Federal Policy Committee, as a way of preventing several

motions on the subject being taken at spring conference on Ming Campbell's third day as leader.

With praiseworthy inclusiveness, the Liberal Democrat Peace Group was asked to put forward a nominee.

Less commendably, the person chosen, veteran peace activist Margaret Godden, was rejected on the grounds that she had a preconceived view.

Whether this stricture applied to others chosen is unclear, but the LDPG was able to nominate David Grace, a former Liberal parliamentary candidate, as a member.

One observer described the group as "pretty evenly balanced between people who don't want the UK to have a nuclear deterrent and people who will decide the issue not on its merits but on its effect on the Lib Dems' electability".

That all turns on what one thinks constitutes 'electability'.

Despite the Lib Dems' supposed attachment to distinctive policy positions, Campbell has always held rather conventional views on defence.

So will he be willing to say that Trident is not 'British', not 'independent' and not a 'deterrent', and that clinging onto it is part of national delusion that Britain remains a superpower, which the country should grow out of?

The group's members are: chair John Roper, Professor Norman Dombey, Tim Garden, David Grace, Nick Harvey MP, Jo Hayes, Michael Moore MP, Stephen Pullinger, Nick Rijke, Julie Smith and William Wallace.

ALL AT SEA

Liberator congratulates Lord Holme, former eminence grise to David Steel and Paddy Ashdown, on reaching his seventieth birthday, an event marked by a party on a boat on the Thames to which none of the collective were invited.

The problem with boats is that one cannot easily get off them when they are in mid-river should one, purely for example, have a sudden need to vote in the House of Lords.

Thus it was that the government survived by just four votes in a division on the Childcare Bill, a difference exceeded by the number of Lib Dem peers afloat with Holme.

An earlier vote on the same bill was marred when an opposition majority of one was overturned when it was discovered that Lib Dem peer Sally Hamwee had arrived in the chamber late and her vote had to be discounted.

By convention, a tied vote means the status quo is upheld, so the government carried the day. What will the whips say about their flock - late or floating?

DARFUR DEFERRED

The Waging Peace charity, run by former Liberal candidate Becky Tinsley, has offered to provide Lib Dem overseas development spokesperson Susan Kramer with information, parliamentary questions and talking points on overseas aid and development, in particular about Darfur, based on Tinsley's specialist knowledge gained from frequent visits to Africa (*Liberator* 309).

But despite repeated requests, Kramer has made no response to Tinsley's offers of a meeting, although her predecessor Andrew George was involved closely. How interested is Kramer in Africa?

SUMMER READING

Still wondering what books to pack for the beach this summer? Liberator asked leading Liberal Democrats to recommend some holiday reading

David Laws

Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* describes an interesting attempt to reduce welfare costs by introducing a reformed diet for those claiming welfare benefits. I regard it as a form of tough love. The same author's *Nicholas Nickleby* describes a promising educational experiment, while his *A Christmas Carol* is a sad tale of a sensible man brought low by the crudest sentimentality.

Simon Hughes

It will be difficult to relax this summer because my re-election as party president is looming. I still have 125,000 new members to recruit by September if I'm to fulfil my original manifesto promise. So at the top of my holiday reading list this year will be *Membership Recruitment for Dummies*.

Elsbeth Campbell

I shall be curling up with a new biography of Lucretia Borgia. Famous for throwing the most the extravagant parties, she was the daughter of a Pope – and there are few of us who can claim that. She had him annul her first marriage on the grounds of her husband's impotence. She was in the habit of taking her father's place at Vatican meetings and owned a hollow ring that she frequently used to poison drinks. In short, she was an absolute scream.

Chris Huhne

Flying long distance in first class, despite all the pampering, can be such a bore I find. To while away the hours when the (no doubt black market) caviar begins to pall, I shall pack *Jeremy Clarkson's Hot 100: Cars That Make You Go Phwoar!* That is, if I can remember in which house I've left it.

Paul Holmes

As a Social Liberal, I shall be re-reading the works that have inspired my outlook. So this year my beach bag will be filled with: *A Typology of Municipal Drainpipes; Individuality, Diversity and Their Eradication; The Sidney and Beatrice Webb Joke Book*. I shall of course ensure that every member of my family takes exactly the same books as me.

Mark Oaten

Opportunities for holiday reading will be limited this year, I'm afraid. First, because I'll be busy trying to establish myself on the minor celebrities circuit with a series of gratuitous media appearances. And second, because when your rucksack is full of books, it's less easy to run away from the paparazzi.

Michael Moore

When he appointed me as shadow foreign secretary, Ming Campbell lent me his old school atlas, and it has been invaluable (despite the ink stains) ever since. I shall certainly be taking it on holiday with me. Whenever trouble erupts somewhere in the world, I look it up and there it is. Nothing much seems to have happened in the Polish Corridor or the Trucial States yet, but I shall be ready for it when it does.

Ed Davey

Ming recently sent me 'Stateside' to discover some 'state of the art' American campaign techniques we could use 'this side of the pond'. And I'm pleased to say I flew back with a seminal volume, *Let's Grab The 2.4 Million and Kick Some Ass* by that respected old hand, Chuck F. Gerrymander III.

Phil Willis

This year's set book is... You! Yes, you boy! Did you throw that? There's always one, isn't there. See me afterwards.

Lord Bonkers

This summer, as every summer, I shall be accompanying the Well-Behaved Orphans to Trescothick Bay in Cornwall for their annual holiday. If I manage to snatch a few moments to myself, I shall look at my own *Thoughts on Free Trade* ("Terribly Good" – *High Leicestershire Radical*).

The Well-Behaved Orphans

We are reading *The Great Escape*, *The Wooden Horse* and *The Colditz Story*.

Book recommendations compiled by Jonathan Calder and Simon Titley

DON'T READ ALL ABOUT IT

Mark Smulian asks if the popular press decline is good news

Liberal Democrats happily pore over election results and poll findings, so here is a different set of statistics that might prove important to their future.

What used to be called the tabloid press is dying. With it could go both the overwhelmingly conservative – sometimes Conservative – influence it has had on its readers, and the mesmerising hold it has had over politicians.

The new sizes and shapes adopted by most national newspapers make the old meaning of 'tabloid' redundant, so let's use the Audit Bureau of Circulation categories.

'National morning popular newspapers' saw a shade fewer than 5% of their readers vanish last year.

The Sinkaway Sun lost 4.29%, barely keeping above the psychologically important three million copies mark. Labour's only reliable supporter, the Mirror, lost 5%, and its Scottish stablemate the Daily Record 5.6%, to give the two combined only just over two million, while the Daily Star contrived to lose 7.15% of its circulation.

Those falls were dwarfed by the Diana-obsessed Daily Express, which mislaid a whopping 11.4% of its circulation, falling to just 831,000 copies. The Daily Mail was static on 2.3 million.

If those figures look bad, consider the 'national Sunday popular' category. The Daily Star Sunday, possibly not long for this world, lost 17.95%, the News of the World lost 6.4% to 3.4m and the People a disastrous 10.92% to 849,000. The Sunday Express did even worse, down 11.87% to 894,000.

Most press barons are conservatives and like their papers to reflect that, but these newspapers are first and foremost businesses not political megaphones, and there is a limit to how long any business can survive such collapses in their customer base without radical change.

Ultimately, newspapers will take any stance that appears to sell copies, and their next logical move may be to abandon most political news in favour of entertainment.

Among the 'national morning quality' papers and their Sunday counterparts, there is a quite different circulation trend.

The Times, Independent and Telegraph saw trivial circulation falls, while other papers had rising circulations.

Among the Sundays, the Times and Telegraph had slight falls, but the Independent and Observer both posted large increases. This sector of the press looks in good health.

It is easy to see why the popular papers are in trouble. You want celebrities? Newsagents' shelves groan with specialist magazines. You want television listings? Several magazines offer the whole week more comprehensively at a cheap price. You want tits and bums? A profusion of lad mags is available.

Even the popular papers' perennial winner of sports coverage looks in trouble with the growth of multichannel television and specialist publications.

You want news? It is everywhere on television and radio, and the BBC Six O'Clock bulletin and what is left of ITV News are tailored to the popular market.

So where are the readers of the popular press going? The tempting answer might be 'the internet' but that would be wrong.

Internet use is spreading fast but is still concentrated among relatively young, well educated and affluent people, exactly the three groups least likely to have read the popular newspapers in the first place.

The most likely answer is that they are not going anywhere except television, where rules on political balance apply.

We have a government that has spent nine years constructing its policies around how they will play in the popular and mid-market press.

It looks now like it need not have bothered. Technological change and market segmentation are slaying the dragon that was the 1980s popular press, and the opinions of newspapers that are shedding up to one-tenth of their readers each year are of diminishing importance to politicians or anyone else.

Once the parties realise that this straitjacket has been undone, what they say and how may change in ways hard to guess at.

Liberal Democrats never received much popular newspaper coverage, so the decline of what have been other parties' organs looks like good news for them.

But how does the party communicate with people who use only television – on which it receives only sporadic coverage – or perhaps the internet, where people can ignore what does not interest them?

One obvious answer might be local newspapers. Wrong. The howls of anguish from the national popular press are as nothing compared with the pain being suffered by the regional daily press – whether morning or evening.

This is where the internet has really hurt, by taking the classified job advertising that is the lifeblood of these papers.

Scarcely a week passes without the media trade press reporting falling profits and rising redundancies at regional dailies. Indeed, the editor of the Manchester Evening News was quoted in Press Gazette as saying that he had extrapolated the circulation decline and discovered that the paper would vanish by 2025 without its radical change to partly free circulation.

Several media voids are opening up, some beneficial to the party, others not.

Mark Smulian is a member of the Liberator Collective

PLAYING WITH FUNNY MONEY

CentreForum is trying to have it both ways with its call for unlimited university fees, says Matthew Huntbach

CentreForum is yet another suspiciously well-funded initiative which seems to have been set up to push the Liberal Democrats towards the right-wing consensus of the mainstream British press, the Conservative Party, and since Blair, the Labour Party. Its latest publication *Open Universities* (full text on www.centreforum.org/Assets/open_universities.pdf), by its director, Julian Astle, contains nothing that has not been common currency in discussion on this issue for years.

It contains the usual praise for financial markets and condemnation of state direction. As a university lecturer who has been directly involved with the issues it discusses for many years (in particular having ten years experience as my department's admissions tutor), I found it contained much sloppy thinking, which someone in my position could have straightened out had the author bothered to ask.

It concludes by expressing disappointment that the introduction of variable tuition fees for universities has not created a market whereby universities compete on fee levels.

The solution it proposes is to remove the current cap of £3,000 on fees. In the past, we often encountered socialists who, when faced with socialist policies that did not work, argued the reason was that they were not socialist enough. Now we encounter free marketers who argue likewise on their ideology.

The reason a financial market in university fees has not developed is that no university wants to advertise it is 'second best' by charging lower fees than its rivals. This is not a market where price is decided by quality; it is one where quality is assumed from price. Furthermore, it is unrealistic, indeed cruel, to expect teenagers paying fees through automatically available loans of amounts far in excess of what they are used to handling to be able to make a rational market decision on this.

In my experience, university applicants, their parents and their teachers are often remarkably ill-informed about what particular degree programmes involve, and rely in making decisions on crude mechanisms that bear little relationship to actual quality, such as newspaper league tables.

This results in just the sort of emphasis on numerical factors (which can be put into league tables) at the expense of complex attributes requiring judgement and open to debate (which can't), which Astle's paper condemns as analogous to Soviet planning.

In fact as a university teacher, the easiest way to get my department a higher position in the league tables would be to make the course weaker, so fewer students fail and first class degrees are easier to get, and to put less effort into teaching it

in order to spend more time boosting the department's research profile.

This could easily be done since, far from being under rigid state control as Astle supposes, UK universities are remarkably free in what they teach and how they decide to do it.

As with schools, there is a feedback mechanism whereby those universities assumed best become or remain best by virtue of attracting the most able students. A university with highly qualified students can afford to be sloppy in its teaching because the students are clever enough to be able to work round the sloppiness and benefit from interacting with their clever classmates.

Astle notes the international reputation of universities, but fails to realise this is determined almost entirely by their research strength rather than their teaching quality. Lifting the cap on tuition fees will mean the high reputation universities can overcharge students in order to subsidise what they regard as their real role, research, and students will be paying not so much for an education as for a brand name.

The question is how high can tuition fees go before sufficiently well-qualified applicants are put off from applying to cause concern to the academics. A cap high enough to cause a price-based market must inevitably mean well-qualified students declining places, and less well-qualified students from wealthier backgrounds taking those places instead.

Astle uncritically praises the USA university system, leading us to believe it places no barriers on access. The reality is that half of the student body at the prestigious Yale, Harvard and Princeton universities comes from the top 5% of the nation's wealthiest families. There is no acknowledgement that the USA has one of the lowest rates of social mobility in the developed world. Astle also fails to note that the division between university and school education varies between countries.

The idea that a market in university tuition fees will cause the 'best' universities to expand undergraduate places is not necessarily true. The 'best' universities maintain their teaching reputation by being exclusive. It may not be in their interest to become less exclusive by taking on more students who will inevitably be less well qualified. Neither is it the case that the university degree programmes with the most demand and highest reputation are the most costly to run, or that the lower demand and lower reputation programmes are cheap to run.

Degree subjects such as business and law are expanding in numbers because they are both cheap to run and in high demand. Science and engineering degree programmes are

contracting and being closed down across the country because they are both expensive to run and in low demand. Astle suggests that students know better than government what degree programmes are best to take, suggesting that universities are in the grip of rigid state planning, which should be removed.

The cynical rise of ‘bums on seats’ degree programmes (attractively titled to appeal to applicants whose knowledge of the world is over-dependent on what they have learnt from entertainment media) and closure of highly valuable but ‘boring’ or ‘hard’ degrees which attract few applicants suggests the reality is that universities are over-driven by fickle demand, and a little more planning based on what experts know are the real needs would not be amiss.

The big competition for students is among those universities which are not the high reputation ones on which media discussion in the UK tends to focus (perhaps because most journalists and opinion-formers attended that sort of university).

To suggest that universities in the UK are somehow isolated from market mechanisms is to ignore the often desperate efforts the lower ranking universities in the UK have to make to fill their places. Many of the students in these universities are only there because they lack the qualifications needed to gain a place in the more prestigious universities. Yet it is not the case that students in them are, or should be, any cheaper to teach. Given that they are less able and less self-directed, they require more effort to teach. Astle suggests such universities should concentrate on more vocational degree subjects. Vocational training, requiring expensive equipment relevant to the vocation, and one-to-one instruction on its usage, may well be much more expensive to lay on than education in more abstract reading-based subjects.

If higher education admission really worked on supply and demand in the way Astle naïvely supposes, it would be simple. Most people would go to the ‘best’ universities, if they could, and there would be no real demand for the ‘worst’ universities. Therefore Oxford and Cambridge universities would expand to cover the entire country’s higher education, all other universities would merge with them or close down. Perhaps the mentality of the extreme free market enthusiast cannot envisage competition working in any other way than grasping for ever higher market share.

The reality is that university admission at present is a market, albeit one where the currency is entrance qualifications rather than cash, and this induces every bit as much competitive behaviour as a cash market. Every academic wishes to teach students best qualified for his or her subject, and avoid teaching those whose qualifications suggest they lack motivation, ability, or necessary preparatory background. Why does Astle suppose this competition for the best students will not drive up standards in just the way he supposes a cash-based market would?

A better hard-headed approach than Astle’s would be to question the value of over-expanding higher education.

If university degrees are treated just as a currency to buy places in the jobs market, then expanding the money supply will increase prices: a basic free market principle. Students taking degrees simply to get jobs which demand degrees only because of a surplus of graduates is not an efficient use of resources.

Again, this is more like the fashion market where expensive brands become necessities regardless of real qualities, or are simply markers of wealth and background, than it is a real value-driven market. Again, opinion-formers who attended elite universities should not suppose their own experience of university equates to the norm across the sector for today’s universities. It may be better to have a smaller number of degree places aimed at those with a genuine desire for learning for its own sake, perhaps as mature students or on a part-time basis, with an expansion of workplace or vocational training which is not forced into the rigid pattern of the three-year degree at a research institute.

One of the great benefits of traditional university education was that it took teenagers from their home background and placed them in a semi-independent but managed environment, contributing greatly to the development of maturity. This is becoming lost in today’s mass higher education system, where cost issues force many students to live with their parents. A system of short-term residential places for young people, perhaps geared to the less academic, and with the intention of expanding their horizons by providing independence and new experiences, may be as worthwhile to society as degree places in neighbourhood universities taken by bored plodders only in order to get jobs which were offered to their parents as school-leavers.

Underneath, Astle’s argument is that if people pay their own money into a service for themselves only, they will be willing to pay more than they would if asked to pay from taxation into a collective fund from which they stand to benefit no more than anyone else.

This is a sound argument, if a cynical one. It is the reason why the dream some have of “making state schools so good that no-one will choose private education” will never come about. There will always be people willing to pay a fortune to educate their own children to a high standard but much less willing to pay even more to educate everyone else’s children to the same standard.

For this reason, I cannot disagree with the conclusion that fee-funded higher education will bring more money into the system. I warm to the argument more when it is put in this realistic way, and not dressed up by attempting to hide the damage it will cause to equal access, or that it will be yet another burden on the young alongside all the other factors leading to increasing generational inequity.

However, Astle cannot have it both ways: arguing both that an effective fee-based market in university places can be established, and that sufficient mechanisms can be put in place so that no student need ever turn away from the higher education which best suits him or her due to the cost.

Market mechanisms can only work if people are affected in their decision making by cost issues; a market in which the buyers are paying with ‘silly money’ (which freely-available loans to teenagers of amounts beyond their comprehension would be) is a recipe for over-pricing and image triumphing over substance.

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A SNARE AND A DELUSION

Claims that 'the market' is all-powerful and beneficial ignore the inability of markets to deliver justice and happiness, says David Grace

I love maps. Particularly, I like maps of mountains like the Coolins of Skye. They are so much easier to climb than the real thing. Apostles of 'the market' both within and without the Liberal Democrats need to remember that the map is not the territory, the theory is not the reality.

In texts from Adam Smith to David Laws, there is 'the market'; in the world there are only markets. Let us therefore explore the reality, and not only the map, and build Liberal policy on what exists as well as what we would like there to be.

In the Platonic world of 'the market', everyone has equal information, supply always responds to demand and competition is utterly free. In the world of Enron, Berlusconi and even Gordon Brown, information is shared very unequally, supply is controlled by the few and the demands of the many are often shaped by them too.

In the real world of soap powder, beer, buses, railways and newspapers, producers seek to dominate markets and restrict competition. The evangelist of 'the market' will of course condemn these departures from theory, but we should take the advice of Sherlock Holmes and make our theories explain the facts and not the facts fit our theories.

'The market' is as much an intellectual construct as was 'the state' in socialist theory. For much of the twentieth century, political discourse was pre-occupied with 'the state' (sometimes called the people, the nation, etc.). When people wanted the government to do something (and especially when people in government wanted to do something), they did not say, "Let's give this minister (commissioner, gauleiter, prefect, etc.) more power".

No, they talked of the interests of 'the state' (people, nation, etc.).

This kind of talk should not work any more. The people (real existing people) do not buy it. However, in the last two decades of the twentieth century and in our own brave new era, there is a new god, 'the market'. These words conceal a slide in meaning, which I call the idealistic fallacy. 'The market' is an idea, a slovenly abbreviation for 'the free market', whereas real markets are not an idea and not very free.

Of course, as Liberals we should prefer free-er markets to less free ones, competition to monopoly, choice to compulsion.

But we should also abandon the old theology of the Market versus the State, which is about as fantastic and as little use as Alien vs. Predator.

Both are false gods. Real markets need real states. Actors in real markets need a framework of law and a guarantee of value. Contract law means you can rely upon bargains made with strangers; property law defines what can be owned and by whom (Can you sell your genes, your ideas or even your cat? Can anyone else?). A stable currency requires legitimate authority, not just a cabal of gold miners. Modern enterprises involving capital from many pockets need company law and banking law.

Above all, making markets free-er requires competition law. Who can doubt that there is a free-er market today in the countries of the European Union because of legislation, not in spite of it?

Well unfortunately, many people, but they should consider what the markets of Europe would be like if each country had been adopting its own legislation on the subject for the last 50 years. With each government lobbied by its own interest groups, there would still be a protectionist plethora of tariff and non-tariff barriers to trade.

Yet there are people who believe that you can have a functioning free trade area without a democratic legislature to agree the rules. If you do doubt that markets need states and you think that freeing markets means less law and a weak state, take a good long look at Russia. The paradox is that law and freedom march together.

All political theories have an ethical root, explicit or implicit. They assume what human beings are like, how they behave and especially how they relate to each other. For Marx, your role as producer defines you; for the marketeers, it is more often your role as consumer.

Feudal societies were made of subjects, nation-states of citizens. Liberals must build their ideas on the real complexity and diversity of people. Yes, we are all both producers and consumers but our roles in society are not exhausted by what we buy and sell. Yes, we are citizens but not everything in our lives, not even the most important, is covered by our public roles. As John Stuart Mill proclaimed, there is also the private sphere. Our freedom depends upon not expecting the state to solve all problems. It also depends upon not expecting 'the market' to solve them.

Ruskin lampooned the theories of economists by comparing them with theories of exercise - callisthenics. He said it was as if you based your theory of exercise on human bodies having no bones.

From this premise you could prove logically that people could roll into balls or cylinders. Your logic would be impeccable but your premise absurd.

This criticism still applies to modern economists, who expect all behaviour in ‘the market’ to be based upon the rational expectations of people whose only motive is to maximise their wealth.

In real markets, people have other desires and motives such as to maximise their free time or the time spent or not spent in one person’s company. In real markets, people do not always recognise the course of action that will achieve their desires. In real markets, their desires and their expectations are partly shaped by suppliers. Above all, in real markets people do not always have the means to convert their desires into effective demand.

It has become fashionable to justify state action today in terms of ‘market failure’. I dislike the term because it implies an assumption that ‘the market’ should have produced a rational allocation of scarce resources in the first place, to provide enough teachers or doctors or houses or whatever the writer wants.

We should not even hint at such an assumption but understand *ab initio* that real markets are good for many things but not all things. Perhaps then we should expect real markets not to deliver social justice or human happiness in general but simply to deliver strictly economic objectives

(assuming there are such things). Unfortunately, real markets cannot always manage that either.

As John Maynard Keynes so compellingly argued, markets will inevitably bring about a balance between demand and supply but the balance will not necessarily be at level where all resources are used or all people employed.

As a young economics student, I heard another unfashionable economist, John Kenneth Galbraith, propose the motion that “This house considers that the market is a snare and a delusion”.

I spoke against him. Now I believe that talk of ‘the market’ is a snare and a delusion, but that real existing markets are powerful tools of mankind to achieve its purposes. They cannot do everything.

Liberals must be wary of state action. There is always a price as well as a benefit for interfering with a market. When it comes to ‘the market’ and ‘the state’, there is not one god, and we should eschew the blandishments of those who say there is.

David Grace is a member of Yeovil Liberal Democrats and a former Liberal parliamentary candidate

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SWEET LAND OF LIBERTY?

The European Parliament has tried to convince America that its refusal to close Guantánamo Bay damages rather than helps the fight against terror, says Liz Lynne

Guantánamo Bay is more than the “anomaly” that Tony Blair calls it. The US decision to operate such an inhuman detention camp turns the very meaning of justice and security on its head. By not closing the camp, the US gives a signal that international laws can be flouted and ignored.

In the face of this travesty of justice, my colleagues and I on the sub-committee for human rights at the European Parliament began to question our own national governments about their silence toward what was happening at Guantánamo Bay.

The detainees were in a legal black hole. Initially, there was no possibility of legal representation, no right of access to a court of law, and interrogation conditions violated every basic convention we believed in. According to the US government, the detainees had no rights under the Geneva Convention intended to protect combatants.

With other Liberal Democrats in the UK and across Europe, we queried how any civilized democratic society could justify this.

If any other country did this to an American citizen, I am sure George W Bush would be the first to condemn it. How dare he accuse other countries of not playing by the global rules? With these thoughts in mind, my fellow MEPs and I joined forces to bring the full weight of the European Parliament to bear on the Bush administration.

Since the opening of the detention facilities, and upon hearing about the torture endured by detainees like my constituent Moazzam Begg, I have campaigned for closure of the camp and the release of those who have been held without charge.

To hold people on an indefinite basis without due process over extended periods of time runs contrary to the most elementary principles of justice. As early as February 2002, I supported an urgency resolution in the Parliament that raised concern about the detainees. Again, in 2004, my colleagues and I gave a recommendation to the European Council on the detainees’ right to a fair trial. In February 2006, around the time when Tony Blair remarked that the camp would have to be dealt with “sooner or later,” the Liberal Democrats in Europe called for it to be “sooner” – and, in fact, immediately.

The question since then has not been whether the detention facilities at Guantánamo Bay should be closed, but rather when and how. George W Bush and his staff have made statements recently that they want to close the detention centre, but that they do not know what they would do with the prisoners. I find this deeply disturbing. The

European Union, the United Nations and human rights groups around the world have repeatedly demanded that Guantánamo Bay be closed. It was this conviction that led to the recent all-party resolution in the European Parliament.

In anticipation of the EU-US Summit, my Liberal Democrat colleagues and I wanted the statement to the US to be as strong as possible. We wanted the EU to speak with one voice and issue a joint action across the European institutions so that there would be no mistake when President Bush came to Vienna on 21 June.

All parties agreed that urging the Bush administration to improve the situation at the detention camp was a necessity. We had been talking about what further action could be taken to put pressure on the United States regarding Guantánamo for quite some time now.

We initially drafted a joint text on the Guantánamo Bay detention centre, which, unfortunately, the European People’s Party refused to sign. It was very strongly worded and condemned the US government out of hand. I spoke to that text on 31 May in the Parliament’s plenary session in Strasbourg.

The EPP group said the reason it didn’t want to sign the original text was because some of its members were on an unofficial visit from the Parliament to Guantánamo Bay and that it wanted to wait until their return. I believe this was partly true but I also believe that the EPP wanted the text watered down so that it could maximize the support within its group. The Parliament voted to delay the vote on the resolution.

I subsequently chaired the drafting meeting on the revised text we voted on in plenary. The negotiations were extremely difficult but I was determined that I wanted to try to get everybody on board so that we could present a united front from the Parliament. It meant that we had to compromise on some of the tougher wording but I believe we managed to retain most of the original and still send a very strong message to the American government.

The resolution we voted on in the plenary session on 6 June contains many important points. It reiterates the call on the US government to close the detention facility and insists that every prisoner should be treated in accordance with international law. That means, in reality, that they should be charged or released. If they are charged, they must be tried without delay in a fair and public hearing by a competent, independent and impartial court of law or an international tribunal.

The military commissions that were authorised by President Bush violate international standards. They are not independent of the executive; they admit secret evidence that is withheld from the defendant; they admit statements obtained through torture; and they do not grant independent appeals. Under this system, the president effectively acts as judge, jury and prosecutor. If the prisoners are released, it is equally important that they not be returned to any state where they could face torture or be subjected to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.

Moreover, the resolution condemns all forms of torture and ill-treatment used in the detention centres, as evidenced in the 19 May report by the UN Committee Against Torture. We have called upon the US authorities to implement the UNCAT recommendations and to ensure that so-called special interrogation techniques including sexual humiliation, using dogs to induce fear and other means that constitute cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment cease immediately.

The US must also ensure that all allegations of torture and other ill-treatment involving US personnel are subject to prompt, thorough and credible investigation and trial. In our resolution, we express our disappointment about the apparent plans in the Pentagon to eliminate a line in the regulations for the treatment of detainees that prohibits humiliating treatment and to delete the explicit reference to the Geneva Convention and the UN Convention Against Torture in the US Army's rule book for interrogations.

In order to ensure that the US complies with international standards and maintains a degree of transparency regarding its compliance, I wanted to ensure that we made a call for unimpeded access to the detainees for the UN bodies and international human rights organisations. Only the Red Cross has been granted official access to the detainees. Our resolution suggests that an ad hoc delegation from the European Parliament be sent to Guantánamo when the Parliament considers it necessary and appropriate to do so.

The MEPs who visited Guantánamo on an unofficial visit made note of improvements with respect to medical care, nutrition, and the expression and exercise of detainees' religious rights and recreation. However, these small steps do not tackle the real problem of an extreme violation of human rights standards and international law. For one, the US must clarify if allegations are in fact true that minors have been or are still held in Guantánamo in contravention of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

With the deaths of three detainees on 10 June, I sought to table an amendment in plenary to at least note that this had

happened – again, I achieved all party support. Of course, the debate has now moved on and it appears as if these deaths might not have been suicides at all. It is important that we find out the truth about this along with all the other issues relating to Guantánamo Bay. Whether they were suicides or not remains to be seen but the disgraceful comments by one American official that this was a PR exercise by the deceased will be remembered for many years to come as, at the least, crass stupidity and, at the worst, an example of the depths that the American government will sink to.

The violation of human rights standards within the detention facilities remains a fundamental concern for all, and especially for me in my human rights work at the Parliament and with my former work with Amnesty International. There is no sign that the US will close the Guantánamo Bay camp in the near future since it plans to open its new windowless detention centre, called 'camp 6', there this August. Although President Bush expressed a desire to close down the camp during the EU-US summit, I take these utterances with a pinch of salt, as he gives no timescale for this and does not have any answers to how the detainees could be returned to their countries of origin safely.

But we will continue to press for closure with as much force as we can. The fight against terrorism, which is one of the priorities of the EU and the US, cannot be waged at the expense of basic values such as respect for human rights. Disregarding the world's legal standards in its proclaimed 'war against terror' severely weakens the credibility and power of the US and its allies that allow this abuse to continue in the fight against terror. International law on torture and other inhumane treatment is unequivocal – the US must put an end to this hypocrisy.

Liz Lynne is Liberal Democrat MEP for the West Midlands and a member of the European Parliament's sub-committee on human rights

BIG BROTHER IS TEACHING US

Can TV's Big Brother teach us anything useful about renewing political participation, asks Michael Meadowcroft

A recent and oft-repeated urban myth is that more people voted in the 2004 final of *Big Brother* than in the European Parliament election held around the same time.

In actual fact, “only” slightly more than one third of the number of public election voters participated in the *Big Brother* vote – 6.3 million as opposed to 17 million. Well that’s a relief then. In fact the figures are still alarming, particularly when one realises that it costs the caller 50p for every vote cast in the *Big Brother* bonanza.

The highly motivated and politically addicted readers of *Liberator* may well be wondering what on earth this has to do with current political life. The answer is that a survey of *Big Brother* voters carried out by Professor Stephen Coleman for the ultra respectable Hansard Society (*How the other half votes: Big Brother Viewers and the 2005 General Election*, May 2006) has produced a number of valuable insights into why large chunks of the UK electorate are brassed off with politics in general and cannot be bothered to turn out to vote.

The research was carried out with a representative sample of 200 *Big Brother* viewers. Those of us who wouldn’t watch the programme even if bribed, bound and brought before the television screen can easily dismiss the research findings as the inconsequential views of members of the public whose television preferences put them beyond the pale. To take such a line would be foolish, particularly at a time when politicians need every insight they can dredge up in order to find answers to the alienation problem. If the British political class cannot engage the millions of *Big Brother* viewers, it is primarily a problem for the politicians rather than for the viewers.

The overriding message of the research is that we now live in an interactive age and that there is a significant section of the public – possibly even a majority – that enjoys, and has got used to, participating in the scenario presented before it on the television screen. Not for nothing are these programmes known generically as ‘reality TV’; they deliberately show intimate aspects of the lives of the participants and judge them according to the aspects of personality thus depicted.

I suspect that just about every *Liberator* reader will have been appalled at George Galloway’s appearance on *Big Brother* and at his reported antics. We probably thought that these would be highly damaging to him and his party. The received truth amongst the protagonists of *Big Brother* is quite the opposite – that his participation actually enhanced his electoral popularity. Arguably the recent local election vote for Respect in his constituency bears that out.

The lesson for politicians and for political parties is clear: that they need to expose themselves more to the electorate at the other side of the television screen and to make themselves available for a live time dialogue with these potential voters. This is not about ‘dumbing down’ but about methodology. The content can be, and should be, intellectually rigorous even if the channel of communication may well foster simplistic questions and comments.

What is clear from the research is that the *Big Brother* audience wants honesty and consistency. The consequence for the politician exposing himself or herself to such cross examination is a requirement for better preparation coupled with an ability to admit fallibility and, even, ignorance. The few occasions when viewers and listeners have been able to question politicians direct have been salutary. One still recalls with glee Mrs Thatcher’s mauling at the hands of Mrs Diana Gould during the 1983 election campaign over the sinking of the General Belgrano.

Stephen Coleman’s research findings do not depict the *Big Brother* viewers as disinterested, bored rejectionists. Roughly the same proportion claimed to have voted in the 2005 general election as the actual turnout and a higher proportion of younger people on the panel (18-25 year olds) claimed to have voted than the equivalent figure for the general electorate: 49% as opposed to 39%. Similarly, 64% of panel members regarded voting as a duty and 34% were even in favour of compulsory voting. Even more significant is that when asked whether they would rather vote in *Big Brother* or the general election, a clear majority (69%) placed greater value on their political votes.

The research elicits opinions on the worthiness of politicians, which, while bringing no comfort to election candidates, may well be little different than those of the electorate as a whole. They sought “genuineness” as the main quality in a candidate, but more characterised the candidates standing in their constituency as “slimy” (29%), “arrogant” (35%) and “false” (53%), than “ordinary” (17%) or “straight-talking” (9%). The participants in the survey demanded more exposure of candidates in interviews, particularly, on television – which they regarded as the most trustworthy medium – and it is clear that, at least for this audience, political candidates are now to be judged in much the same way as *Big Brother* contestants.

One’s first reaction is to be appalled at this parallel but, within the parameters of a general election campaign, it is not so much more than an extension of the political beauty contest involving kissing babies, cycling to Westminster or appearing on chat shows. The sole difference is the more

relentless exposure and the ability to cope with interactive television.

Stephen Coleman himself makes the comment that: "The success of *Big Brother* in generating the kind of participatory enthusiasm amongst its interactive audience that most politicians would wish to engender amongst the people they claim to represent ought not to be read as evidence of a terminal political malaise. On the contrary, the convergence of popular and political communicative styles could have an invigorating effect upon democracy, releasing civic energies which have atrophied over the long years of separation."

If the published views of panel members are to be taken at face value, this new audience does not want, and nor does this very different style of communication require, simplistic answers but rather an open and honest discussion of issues they regard as important. The issues involved, including the presence of British troops in Iraq and global warming, are no different than the preoccupations of the electorate as a whole.

What is striking to me about this survey and its analysis is the resonance it prompts with the American political series, *The West Wing*. I find the programmes compelling, not just because they portray the often cynical wheeling and dealing of American politics with ruthless honesty, but also because they often demonstrate a formidable ability to explain complex issues in clear terms through actors and their scripts. Many times I have been lost in admiration – and sometimes moved to tears – by the brilliance of the dialogue. It seems to me that, albeit in a different format, there are similarities with *Big Brother* in that no concessions are made in terms of complexity or of politically dangerous subjects. The exposure of the key players, warts and all, makes them more rather than less attractive. There are vital lessons to be learnt by 'real' politicians.

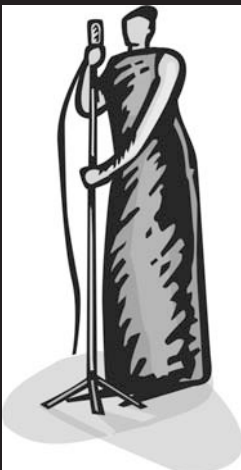
Of course, there are problems in taking on such changes. There are also limitations in how far the logistics of interactive techniques can be taken over. For instance, all absentee voting methods are flawed and unsafe, and I am sure that the polling station and the stubby pencil is still needed to guarantee the legitimacy of the ballot, but, as Stephen Coleman concludes, it would be a mistake for politicians "to dismiss or disdain formats, methods and strategies that have the potential to generate a connection between the political democracy and popular culture."

I came to mock *Big Brother* but, to my chagrin, I stayed to ponder whether it had useful insights into the solution to our political malaise.

The Hansard Society report, *How the other half votes: Big Brother Viewers and the 2005 General Election*, is available at http://hansardsociety.org.uk/publications/recent/the_other_half

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

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THE POLITICS OF HAPPINESS

Liberal Democrats cannot shut down television, but might do something to reverse the trend away from social interactions TV has discouraged, says Steven Gauge

One of my Oxford Psychology lecturers, the late Michael Argyle, was one of the leading academics working to understand happiness. He found that the happiest people were active members of an organised religion or those who did team sports. So, remembering those words as a miserable atheist in later life, I took up playing rugby.

It is not immediately apparent what going to church has in common with rolling around in the mud with some overweight middle aged men but hidden there is I think a useful political message.

Most people are attracted to politics for negative reasons. A violent dislike of Margaret Thatcher was the trigger for many of my political generation. We move into politics to protest against bad things happening. We seek to reverse injustice, to prevent detrimental developments.

It is rare to see a genuinely positive political campaign. Those of us who have spent time standing on the high street armed only with a trestle table and a clipboard will know that it is always easier to get a petition signed if it is to stop something bad happening, such as a post office closing or a lap dancing venue opening. How many political careers have been forged or by-elections won with a vociferous campaign in favour of something new and good and positive?

Charles Kennedy made a concerted effort at the last election to resist negative campaigning. As a member of his general election national tour team, I heard him deliver a deft, discreet but deliberate put down to one of our own candidates who had launched into an unnecessary personal negative attack on Michael Howard.

Resisting the temptation to go negative is a great start, but what would a genuinely positive campaign be like? How would you start to put together a purely positive policy platform?

Meeting the Challenge, the Liberal Democrats' policy review process, has opened up the possibility.

In all my years of pouring over party policy documents, it was the first time I had noticed a section on the pursuit of happiness as a political objective. The New Economics Foundation has probably led the way here, highlighting that, in spite of decades of economic growth, happiness or well-being doesn't seem to have improved. Money can't buy happiness and nor it would seem can neo-classical endogenous growth theory.

If we want to try positive campaigning, we could do well to start with a manifesto for happiness. That's where team sports and religion come into the picture. What they have in common is the social network. Supportive, re-enforcing and

rewarding social networks are vital to our well-being and our happiness.

In his book *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam chronicles the decline in social cohesion in the United States over the last 50 or so years. The trends he demonstrates are all those we would recognise in the UK. Fewer and fewer people are members of clubs and societies, levels of civic engagement are collapsing, fewer people vote or join political parties or attend political meetings. Church attendance and involvement in religious activities has fallen by roughly 25-50% over the last three to four decades.

After an extensive review of the research, Putnam lines up the usual suspects and attempts discover who or what is killing society. He points the finger firmly at the TV generation. Without ethically unjustifiable random trials, it is always tricky to demonstrate definitively a clear causal relationship between the rise in time spent watching TV and the decline of civic society. However, the vast weight of observational data points to the conclusion that, the more we sit and flick in front of the TV, the less we engage with our neighbours, family and friends. And the less we get out and about, the less happy and less healthy we become.

I feel slightly guilty now. I spent a large chunk of my career helping to create the multi-channel world that we now live in. Back in 1989, I was part of a small team of people who launched a version of the American Discovery Channel here in the UK. We argued that we were being terribly Reithian, educating the British public with a diet of 24-hour documentaries, but in truth we were really chasing ratings to maximise advertising revenue by packaging up factual 'infotainment'. *Shark Week* was always the highlight of the year.

What are the policy implications of this? I am not proposing that an incoming Liberal Democrat government shuts down all TV stations, tempting as it might be. I think you can now buy a remote control device that will turn off most TV sets. That could be fun to use in pubs or to wind up noisy neighbours but it is hardly the basis for a manifesto.

What I think we do need to do is try and make it easier and more attractive for people to join clubs, societies and churches and less easy to sit at home in front of the TV.

Look at the state of sports clubs and church halls around the country. Cold, bleak and unwelcoming. A massive programme of modernising the public social infrastructure would go a long way to enticing people out from their very comfortable living rooms.

In the parks near my home in Surrey are the most revolting dilapidated disused sports pavilions and public toilets, which actively discourage anyone from taking their children to play football with their friends, for example. It wouldn't take much to restore these, at the same time providing a catalyst for creation of new clubs and teams.

Society has to compete as aggressively as the TV channels do for viewers. Sixty-four sheet billboards urging people to go to the local library quiz night or book club rather than a sad looking A5 flyer falling crumpled through the letterbox.

Energy regulators have now a requirement to get suppliers working to reduce their customers' consumption of their product. Hence the cartoon gas flames jogging along in TV adverts urging us to cut down our energy use. There is no reason why TV regulators couldn't try and do the same thing – encourage broadcasters to encourage viewers to limit their hours spent on the sofa. *Honey We're Killing the Kids* stands out as a good example.

Perhaps we could consider a ratings tax on broadcasters, with the money raised used for strengthening our social infrastructure.

But should the state encourage religious activities, and if so how? As an atheist, I find it very difficult to countenance state support for religious groups but cannot deny the overwhelming public benefit that comes to believers and non-believers from the overwhelmingly benign work of most church congregations.

In an increasingly multi-faith world, should we be making sure that the planning laws adequately protect religious meeting places and perhaps make greater provision for placing them at the heart of our communities?

The temples of conspicuous consumption, namely the shopping centres that dominate our major town centres, have lots of lessons for us here. Multiplex cinemas and food halls offer choice and convenience in one place. People attract people. Yet the wide range of religious offerings are left in disused shops, scout huts and drafty halls in far flung corners of our towns.

Local authorities should use that lovely form of legalised bribery, Section 106 planning gain, to fund the building of faith centres in the heart of our communities. Bright modern buildings with spaces to be rented out to religious groups of all shapes and sizes, with communal spaces for bringing people of different faiths together. A small humanist corner for the godless members of society like me would be nice.

Would we dare to reverse the Sunday trading laws to give people the space and time to find their faith or an atheist

equivalent again? Are we brave enough to take on the might of big retailers and their understandable but relentless drive for profit?

Protecting one day a week more for faith would also probably have an added benefit for families. According to the Relationships Foundation, 40% of parents with dependant children regularly work at weekends. That is 2.4m families with 4.5m children. Can we shape policy to give some of these children their parents back?

The politics of happiness seems like a much more productive route than the traditional politics of fear, greed, prejudice and class war. Happiness is good for our health. Happy and well connected communities have lower levels of crime and anti-social behaviour. I'll be very happy if the next Liberal Democrat manifesto includes some policies that have increasing happiness as their goal. Failing that, a little more lottery cash to warm up the changing room at my rugby club would be a start.

Steven Gauge is chair of Croydon Liberal Democrats and a former Southwark councillor

DEFENCE MECHANISMS

Dear Liberator,

Stewart Rayment's article on the London local elections (*Liberator* 310) was interesting but is marred by a number of misconceptions. Reading his article, it's all too easy to think, "ah, so that's what went wrong, how could they have been so stupid?" That's comforting, in a sense, as it suggests that the set-backs the party faced would be easy to rectify, with the 'correct' strategy. If only things were that simple.

Take the analysis of the results in Islington. Stewart is quite right to say that there were some shocking reverses in what were notionally the Lib Dems' safest wards. It would be easy to attribute this to complacency and lack of activity in those wards at the expense of ruthless targeting of target wards.

However, as Liberals, we of all people know that the simple answer isn't always the correct one. The Lib Dem campaign in even these 'safe' Islington wards was intensive and surpassed that of all other parties combined. There was a full literature programme across all these wards – perhaps more intensive even than in last year's target seat general election campaign.

Stewart is also incorrect in suggesting that there was little canvassing in the 'safe' wards; in fact there was plenty of data in those wards. The problem was rather that this data gave a misleading impression and, in particular, gave no indication of the rise in the Tory and Green votes. The Lib Dem strategy (just like that in Southwark and Sutton, for example) allowed for retrenchment to defend held wards if there were signs that we were vulnerable there. But those signs simply weren't there.

So what did go wrong?

There was undoubtedly an anti-incumbency factor, and in hindsight it was a mistake not to rebut many of the negative messages in the Labour campaign. Negative messages don't make people rush out and vote Labour but they can make our voters stay at home, vote Green or encourage tactical Tories to revert to type.

There was also a high correlation between wards we lost and those that receive the very oppositionist free weekly newspaper – we don't just need

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to out-perform the other parties but also the local media.

Perhaps we need to factor in a negative incumbency factor when interpreting data in areas where we face a strong, negative opposition?

It's also naïve for Lib Dems to assume that a late swing only happens to other people.

And the lessons to learn? Undoubtedly we need to look at different approaches to gathering canvass data and then to interpreting that data. We need to regain our advantage at a tactical level: it's not enough simply to out-perform our opponents; the margin has been closing and we need to reopen it.

Perhaps most fundamentally, as a number of *Liberator* articles have recently noted, it's one thing to win seats or councils from opposition but quite another to defend them consistently. There must be a role for a more overtly political message in our campaigning, not replacing but overlaying and enveloping the traditional ALDC campaigning style.

Thankfully this is all part of the campaigns review lead by Ed Davey, to which local parties, regional parties, SAOs and online communities such as the Apollo Project have been contributing. Let's learn the right lessons about what went right and what went wrong – and build on this for the future.

**Dominic Mathon
Carshalton**

Liberator from very nearly the first issue, I looked to you to enlighten me. Or was the corruption too bad for you to print?

Since you ask, I cast my three votes for myself, my fellow green and a Liberal Democrat, in the firm belief that he was at heart a plain Liberal. The last mentioned candidate got in.

**Tim Beaumont
House of Lords**

NOT NOW, BUT THEN

Dear Liberator,

In his review of *Neither Left Nor Right? The Liberal Democrats and the Electorate* (*Liberator* 310), Harry Lewis (following the authors?) suggests that the dismally vacuous slogan 'Neither Left nor Right but Forward!' was "coined by the Lib Dems, and uttered by their leader in the general election".

I don't know whether it was Ashdown or Kennedy who 'uttered' this rubbish, but it was certainly not coined in the 17 years since the merger.

That dubious honour – in a slightly snappier version – reportedly belongs to the Yorkshire Liberal stalwart Elliott Dodds, probably in the 1940s when even a Liberal of his strength of commitment was struggling against the two-party monopoly of politics and what seemed to most outsiders as the terminal decline of the Liberal Party.

It is certainly a slogan that has appeared at intervals since then. In the early 1960s, Liberals in the Blackley division of Manchester possessed a dormobile type van with a board on its roof bearing the words 'Not Left, Not Right but Forward'.

We students at Manchester University borrowed this van to go up to the Roxburgh, Selkirk and Peebles by-election. The *Liberal News* reported that the by-election colours were red and green (and being naïve and young in those days, we believed what we read in that organ!).

LAMBETH WALKED

Dear Liberator,

In Stewart Rayment's article *Sucked Into the System* (*Liberator* 310), you mention the loss of Lambeth but fail to refer to it later.

I suspect that the reason the Liberal Democrats lost was that the electorate believed the hammered-home, and not denied, Labour accusations of Lib Dem corruption but, as a subscriber to

So we covered up the offending slogan with red and green dayglo home made posters. When we got to Hawick we discovered that the colours were black and yellow but our mistake didn't seem to affect the result.

In the 1980s, some of the less ideologically rooted members of the SDP flirted with 'Not Left Not Right but Forward'. It didn't do them much good either.

Tony Greaves
House of Lords

DON'T BLAME THE MANAGEMENT

Dear Liberator,

In the hunt for the NHS misspent millions, the critics blame the management or the politicians. Yet these professional cynics are getting things wrong again in attributing blame. In fact, even their solutions of giving power back to the nurses and doctors would make things worse for the NHS.

It is simply ridiculous to suggest that the medical staff have the management skills needed to run an organisation that has an £87bn budget, has an economy equivalent to Austria, is the 33rd biggest economy in the world, and which employs over 1.3 million people (the world's third largest employer after China's armed forces).

There is also the critics' oft recited cry that the managers are not doing their job and that the private sector management would be more effective. Given the cost overruns and construction delays in projects like the Channel Tunnel, West Coast Main Line and the yet to be completed Wembley stadium, it is hard to take seriously this suggestion.

Ironically, the business sector has often had to go to central government to bail it out its mistakes, often on a scale much larger than the relatively minor current deficit in the NHS.

Another criticism that the opponents of the NHS put forward is that the government places undue emphasis on setting targets such as cutting waiting lists and hospital league tables.

This is curious because it is difficult to identify any business organisation, even newspapers, which does not at the beginning of its financial year use a performance related targeting system. To suggest that an £87bn organisation like the NHS should not utilise normal

business-type techniques is verging on cloud cuckoo land. It's curious that the critics' often quoted refrain that the Continent provided a higher standard of health care has become muted, now that the NHS has achieved its target of being one of the leading premier healthcare providers in Europe.

Nicholas Newman
Oxford

RENDITION LIES

Dear Liberator,

The government's insincere and unbelievable denial of complicity in rendition flights and procedures resembles the "hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil" of the three wise monkeys, their ears covered (so they hear no good either).

In order for what the government, Blair, Straw and their cronies are saying to ring true, or be believed by a rational mind, the world would have to be a different place, and human existence a different phenomena than it is.

It is in fact an understatement to accuse the government of lying; there is no power in human language to describe such dishonesty and duplicity, and the cruel effective support of torture (electrodes placed on penises and testicles and inserted into anuses and vaginas).

The question that follows is, what person of integrity can now, with a clear conscience, hold the membership card of the Labour party?

Victoria Townley
Wood Green

CLAUSE FOUR MOMENT

Dear Liberator,

We keep hearing from Mark Oaten and his allies calls for a 'Clause Four Moment'.

For example, an article on the Guardian's website (17 May), written by one Olly Kendall (billed as "Charles Kennedy's former press aide"), claimed that a "crucial challenge" was "to engineer the Lib Dems' Clause Four moment". Kendall continued, "The Lib Dems' own Clause Four moment will come when a leader is brave enough to take on and reduce the power wielded by activists at their biannual party conferences – where Lib Dem policy is decided. For example, at the autumn conference last year a very sensible proposal to reform the Post Office was

defeated by a wrecking motion. While the policy did return to this year's spring conference where it was passed, it was a diluted version of the original.

"It is one of many policies supported by a majority of MPs and party members but over-ruled by a small group of party activists. Now the local elections are over and the necessity for a buoyed up activist base has momentarily passed, there is arguably a window to make the case for a watering down of the conference powers instead of a continued watering down of party policy."

Kendall added this provocative advice to Ming Campbell: "What better way to assert himself and silence his detractors than to take on his own party and win?"

This is just the latest example of certain people apparently obsessed with a 'Clause Four Moment'. Mark Oaten himself used this argument in a BBC News Online interview (2 November 2001), when he said, "We haven't got a Clause Four, Militants or rot at the core of the party. Oddly enough, if we did it might be helpful because we could then make a big demonstration of tackling them and the public could then engage in what [the Huhne review of public services] was about."

For a long time, I couldn't understand what all the fuss was about. Why is 'Clause Four' considered such a threat and why must we get rid of it? Eventually, curiosity got the better of me and I consulted the Liberal Democrats' party constitution, to see what Clause Four actually says.

It turns out that Clause Four is headed "Local Parties" and begins, "There shall be Local Parties so far as possible throughout Great Britain."

Dangerous left-wing stuff, as I'm sure you'll agree. It gets worse. Clause 4.5 (a) stipulates that a primary objective of local parties is to get Liberal Democrats elected.

I appreciate that the relationship between Mark Oaten and his local party might be under some strain, but is abolishing every single local party the answer?

Leave Clause Four alone, I say.

Len Possett
Dollis Hill

The Dividing Line Between Success and Failure Patrick van Schie and Gerrit Voerman (eds) LIT Verlag 2006

The subtitle of this short book tells you straight out what it is about: "a comparison of liberalism in the Netherlands and Germany in the 19th and 20th centuries".

I immediately thought it was a little odd that anyone had bothered to publish this in English. When I started reading, I began to wonder why anyone had bothered at all, since the essays gathered within almost all take the view that there are not and never have been any special links between liberals in Germany and the Netherlands.

One did not influence the other, ideas did not travel and their liberal politicians had little contact.

Despite this, and the book's clearly specialist nature, there is some interest for anyone who wants to know more about some of the Liberal Democrats' main European partners.

The Netherlands boasts two liberal parties – would such a split happen here under proportional representation? The larger is the VVD, a party which combines an economic policy that would fit into the British Conservatives with a liberal outlook on social issues that would not.

Its smaller counterpart, the curiously-named D66, is a liberal party very much like the Liberal Democrats.

The VVD has roots stretching back into the 19th century, when it was the party of the embattled secular middle classes at a time when religious-based parties dominated.

REVIEWS

D66 was formed in 1966 as a social liberal party.

They have a somewhat wary relationship (which is evident to anyone who has seen the Dutch delegation at a Liberal International congress) but periodically end up in the same coalition.

Germany boasts only one liberal party, the FDP, of which this book gives a rather unflattering picture.

I was surprised to learn that the

VVD refused to join LI until 1960 because it believed the FDP to harbour too many ex-Nazis, even though it was an LI member.

At least the VVD and D66, whatever one thinks of them, have had consistent and coherent political outlooks.

By contrast, the FDP seems to have tried out most corners of the political

spectrum, undergoing periodic and abrupt changes in the groups of voters it has tried to cultivate.

Its status as Germany's third party, before the rise of the Greens, ensured it an almost perpetual place in coalition governments, but since 1983 it has slipped into being an adjunct of the Christian Democrats. I found it hard to see how the FDP exercised influence when it has become so thoroughly tied to one of the two large parties.

I imagine this book will find a rather small audience, but will be sought out by those with particular interest in European politics.

Mark Smulian

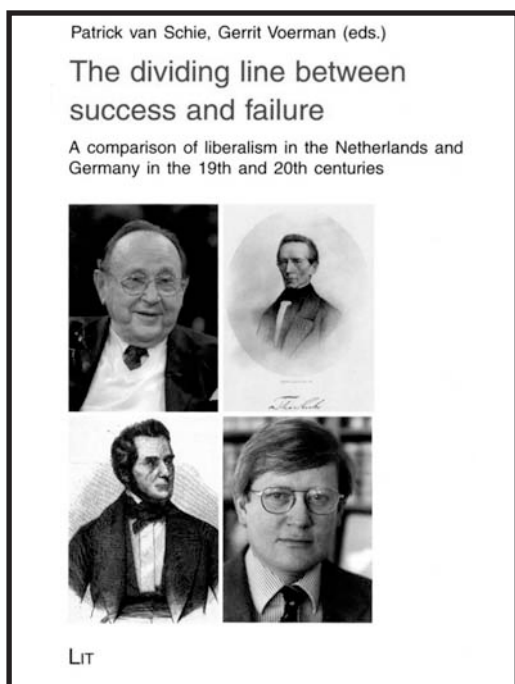
The One-State Solution: A breakthrough for peace in the Israeli-Palestinian deadlock by Virginia Tilley University of Michigan Press 2005 £17.99

Virginia Tilley has written one of the best books that I have read about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. It is thoughtful and gives a judicious and up-to-date analysis; not merely of how people would like things to be but particularly of 'facts' as they actually are.

In particular, it provides a very clear analysis of the prospects of a nation state for Palestine on the 1967 pre-war borders. Tilley concludes from that analysis that such a solution is now impossible. Principally because the scale of Israeli settlement is now so great (now more than 250,000 people in post-1967 lands) that there is no prospect that they can be wholly removed.

I had the opportunity to visit the West Bank last November. Sadly, and with great regret, I have to agree with Tilley's key conclusion. I was astonished by the scale of Jewish settlement on Palestinian lands and the pace with which it is being advanced. This is in complete defiance of repeated international calls for it to cease. I see no realistic prospect of it being wholly removed. It is important to remember that the Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza strip was only achieved with great difficulty and involved only 8,500 Israelis.

I saw at first hand the daily political pressure on Palestinians in Jerusalem to emigrate to the West Bank. That pressure is beginning to have its effect and Israel clearly intends that the balance of population will significantly shift towards a dominant Jewish



majority. The ring of new Israeli settlements now virtually surrounds Jerusalem and increases Palestinian isolation. The settlers in these new towns are attracted by subsidised housing and guaranteed jobs. Their water supply (almost entirely taken from Palestinian wells without compensation) provided for plush gardens and swimming pools, which Palestinians can only view with wonder. This is indeed the good life, why should they give it up? I fear they will not.

Tilley sets out all this very clearly in the chapter called 'Immovable Objects'. Where however I start to disagree with her is in the conclusion that she draws from the facts. She concludes that a two-state solution is not feasible and all our efforts should be directed to the creation of a single state, with Israelis and Palestinians living side by side.

She admits that this will be extremely difficult to achieve but argues that it is now the only feasible option. My disagreement takes two forms. Firstly, I do not believe that it is the only option; secondly, I do not believe that it is a viable option at all. The attitudes of the two sides are so entrenched and the lack of trust now so deep that one state is not in my view feasible. I think the two-state solution, albeit with modified but viable borders should still be pursued.

This is not the place to set out my thoughts in more detail but I hope that I have said enough to stimulate potential readers of the book into debate. One small further criticism. I do think that reports on such issues as territorial plans need to be accompanied by good maps and even a few photographs. Although there are some maps in the book, they are small and not properly indexed. There are no

photographs. I hope this could be remedied in any future reprints.

Mike Gwilliam

Mary Wollstonecraft: A New Genus by Lyndall Gordon Little Brown 2005 £25.00

Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* is one of a small number of works that lies unequivocally in the Liberal canon. It is a book of the rights and responsibilities of individuals, set against the shortcomings of their lot at the time. To make claims beyond that would invoke anachronism. Wollstonecraft was part of a radical milieu with which we can identify, but a load of bollocks is written about her, by enemies and supposed friends alike (mostly socialists). Lyndall Gordon doesn't fall into this trap, she doesn't claim her for anyone – except perhaps women in the broadest sense.

If there is a fault with this book, it is in its detail, which most of us don't need to know – the *Vindication*, perhaps *Maria*, and a bit of background are enough. A pig's ear of relationships, redeemed in her partnership with Godwin, who in turn makes a pig's ear of her memory in his grief at her death in the wake of giving birth to Mary Godwin. What happens next is her daughters Fanny and Mary and their relationship with Shelley, Byron and all that goes with it. Who are we to cast stones? Some great works came out of it, one could only have wished happier times on all the parties.

In unravelling the domesticity of this story, Gordon gives us much more. She questions the promiscuity of the Victorian myth. First and foremost is

Wollstonecraft the educator, most notably of women, but nothing is lost on the rest of the species. She

elevates our understanding of Mary's first-hand analysis of the revolution and terror in France, and her travels in Scandinavia – more psychological than topographic perhaps, in the wake of her disastrous relationship with Gilbert Imlay (Fanny's father). There are some serious film rights in all this, which Gordon should look to in the light of the *Da Vinci Code* nonsense.

As a portrait of the times, if you've read Jane Austen you won't fault it. Two hundred years later, where are women? Better by far, but we have a government that would rather put them to work than recognise that that is precisely what raising a family is; natural childbirth is not clinically convenient in a male dominated medical profession, to say nothing of the multi-cultural dimensions. *La lutte* continues.

Stewart Rayment

Flanimals and More Flanimals by Ricky Gervais Faber & Faber 2004/5 £9.99 each

Cruelty has gone out of fashion in children's books and cartoons. The rot set in with *Scooby Doo*, where the gratuitous violence found in *Tom and Jerry* gave way to leaden morality tales.

Nothing in the past thirty years of this patronising tosh would indicate that putting children through the moral equivalent of a sheep dip has had the slightest benefit for humanity. The appearance of *Flanimals* suggests this era may finally be on the way out.

Author Ricky Gervais is best known as writer and star of the sitcom *The Office*. His TV work is cruel but it is the cruelty of embarrassment. With *Flanimals*, Gervais offers an altogether different kind, an almost blasé cruelty that recalls Harry Graham's *Ruthless Rhymes for Heartless Homes*.

Flanimals are a menagerie of ugly mythical creatures whose existence is futile, violent or both. Rob Steen's illustrations go way beyond the repellent aliens found in the famous *Star Wars* bar scene.

One illustration of three different species informs us that this is a "Grundit dipping a Gum Spudlet into a Coddlelop. Looks cruel, doesn't it? Actually it improves the flavour."

The language is part of a tradition of English nonsense going back to Lewis



Carroll, via Stanley Unwin, Rambling Syd Rumpo and Vagon poetry, and will appeal to fans of all four.

A simultaneous appeal to children and adults is another thing to be said in favour of these books, especially for parents with a visceral hatred of singing *The Wheels On The Bus Go Round And Round*.

Both books have sold well (the Gervais name has undoubtedly helped), but not as well as Faber hoped, one suspects, since both volumes are widely remaindered for less than a fiver. All the more reason to buy them now.

Simon Titley

The Old Munster Circuit by Maurice Healy Wildy 2001 £19.95

Maurice, bon viveur and man of liberal inclination, though his politics were of a moderate nationalism, held court at the Bar and Inner Temple between the great wars. These rambling anecdotes, which have remained in print for over 60 years, subject of many a boozy night around legal and club tables, stem from his earlier years in Ireland. One might say they are part of an oral tradition; all of us know someone we can hear spinning these yarns.

The stories are short and light, though often with a seriousness beneath them. Bored one night after the Kanturk Assize, the assembled barristers troop off to a local theatrical performance, a melodrama. The villain has just appraised the heroine that she is ruined, waving document in hand, and to her pleas Camillus Ronayne shouts out "Object that the document is insufficiently stamped". Shouldn't it be easier to download stamp duty documents from a website these days? Could whichever parliamentarian is responsible look into it?

Beneath the tales, one gets a flavour of political preferment in legal appointments – Whig barristers finding their careers stultified by the Salisbury government, and as a Home Ruler one suspects, this may have brought Healy over the water in the wake of Republican triumph.

A jolly romp with much in it besides and some corrective to the sourer nationalist analysis of Ireland before independence, warts and all.

Stewart Rayment

Pelé, the autobiography by Edson Arantes do Nascimento Simon & Schuster 2006 £18.99

Sometime in the mid-1980s, I was invited to a social in shack over in East Ham (not even West!) that would be addressed by Pelé. Pelé was in the country at the time, and was "an MP for Liberal International's Brazilian member party" I was told. Since Rif Winfield was organising this event, I treated this with a measure of scepticism. Quite rightly, Rif hoped to draw a crowd although he knew Pelé was not going to show.

He was actually minister of sport in the Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (PSDB) government. I'm not sure if they were members of LI at the time. Under Fernando Henrique Cardoso, who appointed Pelé, they certainly had social democratic credentials (in a Brazilian sort of way), but American pressure (World Bank/WTO – surely not?) has made them plough a neo-liberal furrow. It is now a member of the Christian Democrat International.

Pelé claims in the book a lack of interest in party politics – either in football or in government. Cardoso seems to have given him a certain independence of action. The corruption that underlies Brazilian political, business and sporting life bubbles to the surface regularly throughout the book. One of Pelé's achievements as minister was to reform the conditions under which professional footballers played in Brazil – they were virtual slaves of the club that signed them, even after their contracts had expired. The flip side of this, as commentators have since said, it that the new arrangements benefited companies like Pelé's.

Pelé left under something of a cloud concerning corruption. His company was accused of misappropriating money for a charity football match for UNICEF that had been cancelled. Pelé covers this in a couple of paragraphs; he trusted those who ran the company for him, and put a stop to things as soon as he was alerted to them, but critics have said you can't be naïve all your life.

I would like to have read more about Pelé's political career. Given the

above, one can understand why an autobiography may be circumspect (litigation is still in hand). In any case, it is not what most people want to read this book for; and you'll enjoy it for those reasons... what a man.

Stewart Rayment

The Greatest Game Ross Fitzgerald and Ken Spillman (eds) Heinemann Australia 1988

It's now nearly twenty years since this remarkable collection was published. It contains work from many of Australia's greatest names, the historians Manning Clark and Geoffrey Blarney, the poet Geoff Guess, and David Williamson by part of his play – later memorably filmed – *The Club*.

Literature of this quality has been associated with cricket and golf but seldom with any variety of football, albeit that Aussie Rules is surprisingly its oldest codified form.

I'm one of the few English people who believe that Aussie Rules is 'the greatest game' but that's not the point. What is important is how sport is treated in Australian (and New Zealand) society and how it is here.

Australians are sometimes described as – or accused of being – 'sports mad'. This is only partly true. Some of them are as indifferent to sport as a minority is here.

There is no doubt that the Aussie Rules Grand Final, the Melbourne Cup, the Boxing Day Test day and the Anzac Day Rugby League International are highlights of the Australian calendar. The Bradman and Phar Lap sagas are part of Australian mythology and nation building.

However Ron Barassi, probably Australia's greatest and most single minded football coach, said that no game was as important as unemployment statistics.

And would an Australian agree with the late Bill Shankley's remark that "football is not a matter of life and death – it's more important than that!?" Now that is sports madness – in a clinical sense.

Likewise an Oxford United supporter moved home to be near the team's new stadium. As the team declined, he claimed that he "used to sing his heart out" but now he could



not because he “was crying in it”. It’s only a game, mate!

Most Australians would agree that sport is an important part of life. Given their disproportionate dominance, now perhaps declining, in tennis, swimming, Rugby League and cricket, it is remarkable that it is seen as no more than that.

The soccer World Cup is nearly upon us. Up will go the English flags. Chauvinism will dress up as sport.

Let us keep a sense of proportion. The Australians would. For many reasons, Liberals should.

Roger Jenking

Marx’s Revenge: the resurgence of capitalism and the death of statist socialism

by Meghnad Desai
Verso 2002 £19.00

This book is now in paperback. The heavens rejoice when a sinner repents. Desai is quite sure himself whether he does this (after all, he’s only talking about the death of ‘statist’ socialism), but he goes far enough to gladden the hearts of revolutionary capitalists and leave serious doubts in the red mind.

Too bad socialists rarely read their catechisms, still more see them through (a bit like Tories and neo-Liberals

trying to make sense of Adam Smith by picking out the bits they like and ignoring the rest).

Desai does not ignore Smith, he starts with him, as this is necessary to any understanding of Marx as an economist. He then goes on to rehabilitate Marx as an analyst of high Victorian capitalism. Marx thus says little of early 20th century capitalism, whose developments he neither did, nor could predict – any more than Keynes, Hayek or Friedman could make predictions, except in the most general sense.

So turning to that piece of arrant nonsense that has cost the lives of so many, *The Communist Manifesto*, which of Marx’s generalities does Desai think still resound today? “The need for a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe... through its exploitation of the world market (they have) given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country... In place of the old local and national seclusion, we have intercourse in every direction – universal interdependence of nations”. Well this is essentially what Smith told Marx, and what Cobden and Gladstone strived for.

And so for Marx, for this is the lesson Desai teaches – the fulfilment of capitalism is a prerequisite for socialism – “Communism was to make humans

realise that they were free only when they recognised their mutual interdependence – that none could be free when anyone else was not’. Poor Karl, he only need have asked John Stuart Mill.

But the problems Marx, or as Desai would put it, the Marx of *The Communist Manifesto*, was that he sought the secret of change and thought that he’d found it through the misappropriation of Hegel. Marx may not have said much about this in his later life, but the problem lies in those who picked up the torch and thought that it gave them a ‘scientific’ inevitability to the outcome of their beliefs. Worst of all, when some of these followers came to power in primitive backwaters, economically speaking, they ossified Marxist thought to their own experiences and requirements, and this became sanctified by the mantle of their success.

The problem with capitalism is that it is not even in its development. Engels finds disparities in Manchester in 1844 and you only have to look around you to see that this prevails through to the present. Capitalism, for what it is worth, has enabled populations to swell in those societies where it is rooted, without the major catastrophes anticipated by Malthus.

While it is uneven, in time and place, in the global economy it has, by and large, managed to meet the challenges set by the uncertainties of economic life – crises of climate for example. Of course, this could be done better, but the apparatus to achieve such is still developing. Furthermore, it has operated best where the institutions of economic freedom are matched by the institutions of political freedom and the rule of law.

Desai presents us with a potted history of the capitalist era and the passage of economic thought through this. To a Liberal, there should be few surprises in setting Marx back in his context. Years of perversion through Marxist Leninism and its offshoots stand to be corrected. There are challenges ahead – how we meet the errors of so called neo-Liberalism not least, but a thorough understanding of how the world’s economies have developed is necessary to meet these and Desai’s book is a good starting point.

Stewart Rayment

Monday

To London for the launch of my new book *The Bonkers Code*. I had the idea for it when I was told that an American chap was making a fortune out of the tale of a sinister conspiracy. I took a particular interest in this as I understood my interlocutor to be saying that the conspiracy was conducted by the SDP – I posted sentries and called out the militia without delay. A little fine-tuning of my ear trumpet revealed, to my understandable relief, that the sinister organisation at the heart of the book was not the SDP but Opus Dei, but even so it set me thinking. What if, after Joseph of Arimathea had brought Liberalism to England, he had conducted a marriage with, say, an ancestor of Nancy Seear? And what if that marriage had produced offspring whose heirs are amongst us even today? I retired to the Library at once to dictate the whole thing to my Literary Secretary.

Tuesday

In recent days, there has been a great deal of ill-informed comment about our Deputy Prime Minister's penchant for the game of croquet; he has suffered obloquy and had contumely poured over him – and dried contumely is a devil to brush off one's jacket. The charge seems to be that, by indulging in this pastime, Prescott is betraying his proletarian roots. What rot! Have these people never been to Kingston upon Hull? If they did so, they would see games of croquet taking place on every street corner, allotment and piece of waste ground. After a hard day's trawling, there is nothing the doughty citizen of that historic city enjoys more than tying his whippet to a hoop and wielding the mallet in his shirtsleeves. Granted the game is a little rougher than that one encounters in the Home Counties – and features a more prominent role for dried fish – but to dismiss it as the preserve of the aristocracy betrays the most dreadful ignorance.

Wednesday

I have been reading more about these Opus Dei people. Did you know that Ruth Kelly, the woman with the deep voice and strange hairstyle who was briefly in charge of the nation's schools (presumably on the grounds that she attended both Millfield and Westminster herself), is one of them? Apparently they wear spiked bracelets around their thighs – it can't have made question time in the House any easier for her. Just imagine it: You are trying to find the figures for the number of children taking Hard Sums in the Soke of Peterborough in your folder when you suddenly feel the most ghastly pain. No wonder she struggled sometimes. Still, Mr Gladstone would scourge himself at the drop of a hat, and no one thought any the less of him for it.

Thursday

At the village shop, I encounter my old friend Mark Oaten – his days as Rising Star the Indian brave now far behind him, I fear. "Another gross of Kit-Kat, Mr Patel," he demands, and I am not surprised to see that he has a bit of a tummy on him. It transpires that he is trying to obtain a Golden Ticket that will win him ingress to something called "The Big Brother House" and numerous appearances on the electric television as a result. He assures me that this is the key to his rehabilitation, but I

Lord Bonkers' Diary

have my doubts. Mind you, I did see our own Julia Goldsworthy take part in some form of sports day, and enjoyed it thoroughly.

Friday

The morning brings news that the first printing of *The Bonkers Code* has already sold out: I allow myself a second helping of kedgeree. When I stroll down to the village, however, I find the place in turmoil. So vast are the crowds come to view the ceiling painting of the Circumcision of the National Liberals (to which I allude in the book) that PC Heath has had to be called for to steward them. When I

return home I receive an angry telephone call from the clubhouse at Rosslyn Park, where equally large numbers are demanding a sight of their painting of 'The First Lady Bonkers Going Over From A Five-Yard Scrum'. Then I hear cries from the garden and hurry out to find Meadowcroft, a broom in one hand and an orchard doughty in the other, driving away some people who are trying to dig up my lawn to look for the first edition of Mill's *On Liberty*, the discovery of which marks the denouement of my bestseller. "They liter'ry types be nothing but trouble," my gardener opines. I join in with a rolled-up copy of the *High Leicestershire Radical* and we soon command the field.

Saturday

Donning the velvet smoking jacket and wielding the cigarette holder – you know what we writers are – I go through the morning's post: an invitation to judge the next Booker prize; another to open the annual Hull vs Grimsby croquet match; a letter asking me how to spell 'Mississippi'; a parcel of books to review for *The Times Literary Supplement*. I think the literary life will suit me down to the ground.

Sunday

You may recall that poor Menzies Campbell was bullied into promising to sell his Jag during the leadership contest – he tells me that Clegg and Teather were the ringleaders. I suggested that he keep it in one of my outbuildings here at the Hall until the fuss has blown over, and he gratefully accepted the offer. This evening I decide to take her for a spin, as we don't want her getting out of condition. As I bowl along the lanes of Rutland, I ponder how to spend my windfall from the success of *The Bonkers Code* (I have been fielding calls from Hollywood moguls all day). The Reverend Hughes is always launching appeals to repair the roof of St Asquith's; the Home for Retired Canvassers at Herne Bay would appreciate a cheque, no doubt; I might treat myself to another race horse – it is simply years since I won the Derby; perhaps some jube-jubes for the Well-Behaved Orphans? At this point in my revelry, there is a frightful bang and I find that I have driven the Jag into someone's garden fence. I beat a hasty retreat, only to wake in the small hours alarmed lest the registration number has been snapped by one of these new cameras the police have everywhere. (Rather unsporting, don't you think?) Remembering, however, that the Jag is still registered in Ming's name, I turn over and soon go back to sleep.

Lord Bonkers, who was Liberal MP for Rutland South-West 1906-10, had his Code deciphered by Jonathan Calder.
