

liberator



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COMMENTARY

HIDDEN DEPTHS

Nobody could reasonably have expected Nick Clegg to command the country's attention and solve all the Liberal Democrats' problems within eight months of taking office.

What they could expect was solid progress towards these goals. Look through this issue of *Liberator* and you will find a theme running through most contributions, which is not something we planned at the outset.

The concerns expressed are that the party has not been able to find clear identifying themes with which to engage voters (and act as successors to tuition fees and Iraq) and that, insofar as it has tried to, the results have been either alarming or incomprehensible.

As Richard Kemp notes (see page 18), were he to put a cold compress to his head and then compose an economic treatise for his Focus leaflets, he could probably demonstrate that the present tax policy is more progressive than was the previous one of charging a 50p rate on earnings above £100,000.

Regardless of Kemp's, or any other Liberal Democrat's, choices of headgear, the prospect of the party being able to explain this new policy are slim. As for the sudden emphasis on tax cuts, even the Tories have realised that voters equate these with service cuts and regard promises to reduce the total tax burden with suspicion rather than gratitude.

Readers may have missed the Lib Dem 'promise' on cutting the overall tax burden. It is hidden in the depths of *Make It Happen*, in a section to which the party has drawn no attention and has omitted from the conference motion on that document.

Even if the idea of somehow cutting taxes without damaging services were correct, this shifty way of getting it accepted is not.

It is of a piece with Clegg's leadership campaign, which sought to be unspecific for fear of frightening the party. If those who want to reduce the overall tax burden haven't the confidence to argue their case in their own party, on what possible grounds do they expect to convince sceptical voters?

As Richard Grayson's article shows (see page 10), increased public spending has demonstrably improved services, and the UK still has far to go to reach the standards enjoyed elsewhere in Western Europe.

As Gerald Vernon-Jackson argues (see page 19), ditching most of the identifiable policies the party ever had risks going into the next election banging on about electoral reform, a course tested to destruction 20 years ago.

He suggests the party should instead emphasise its local record, an area in which Clegg has been obtuse, preferring to pick fights with the party's councillors over directly elected health and police authorities (a bit more Balkanisation of local services and we'd no doubt need councils back to coordinate them).

It is not Clegg's fault that he inherited the shambles of the Lisbon treaty referendum from his predecessors. Yet even in this field, where Clegg's commitment to Europe is absolutely clear, party policy has still been presented in terms of calling for an in/out referendum. This is a sop to Eurosceptic opinion if ever there was one, based presumably on the premise that pro-Europeans have nowhere else to go. As Chris Davies argues (page 16), another European campaign fought on the basis of timidity and equivocation will lead to another fourth place behind UKIP.

Why the combination of caution and covertness? Clegg is self-evidently an intelligent man and things he has said and written in the past suggest he is well aware of the problems caused by the party's endless efforts to avoid attracting any specific constituencies of voters for fear of giving offence to others.

He is also surely well aware that the 'we can win everywhere' approach also carries with it the potential to lose everywhere.

Is the problem the cocoon of usual suspects from the public relations and advertising trades who have surrounded him and think that, if the party says enough different things to different demographics, it can somehow cover all the bases? Is it, more excusably, that he is still finding his feet?

How about, as Alan Sherwell suggests (see page 12), being the party that wants to tax 'right', to pay for the services it and the public judge necessary without being tied to the albatross of seeking tax cuts in a recession.

How about, as *Liberator* suggested in its previous issue, being the party that will protect voters' privacy and rights in an era when every bus seems to carry a disk of carelessly lost government data, and Labour's drive to turn Britain into a police state grows ever more menacing.

How about, also, being unequivocally pro-European, which does not mean being uncritical of the European Union but does mean dropping policies designed to entice 'drawbridge up' bigots.

Tax is the issue of the moment that is causing disunity in the party. Dissension is always worsened if any large group of people feel there has not been an honest debate about the position the party is taking.

Members, of whom there seem to be fewer each year, and activists, who are becoming yet more rare, can vote with their feet. If they do, all the clever wonkery and media positioning in the world will not be enough.

RADICAL BULLETIN

SPEAK FOR ENGLAND

Those who thought the Bones Commission's proposals to centralise control of the Liberal Democrats would sail through without opposition received a distressing shock when the party's English executive met on 25 July.

This meeting came only a few weeks after the Federal Executive had surrendered its powers to the Bones-promoted Chief Officers Group (Liberator 327), a body of assorted ex-officio office holders intended to 'run' the party, with the elected FE reduced to asking questions after the event.

The one concession the FE gained was that it could have a working group to look at changes to Bones's proposed membership of the COG, which was top-heavy with parliamentarians.

This has agreed that the FE will at least get all COG agendas and will receive reports. It is also wrestling with whether substitutions will be allowed, since parliamentarians are notoriously bad at attending meetings of party bodies.

The English executive proved to be made of sterner stuff, despite the watchful presence of leader Nick Clegg's bag-carrier Matthew Hannay. Asked to give up both its budgetary powers and those over candidates, the executive declined by 24 votes to nil.

"People were appalled by the way the FE behaved and wanted to kick Bones out," one of those present said. "It was no holds barred."

Quite apart from issues of where power over money will lie, Bones's proposed 'leadership academy' for candidates in winnable seats has proved a stumbling block.

This is because of the arcane but crucial issue of the point at which a candidate would go through the academy.

If any approved candidate can apply for a winnable seat and then, following selection, go through the academy, it would be merely a superior form of training and unobjectionable.

If, though, a candidate can apply for a winnable seat only after having graduated from the academy, it becomes something very different, and effectively puts candidate approval not in the hands of regions but in those of whoever controls admission to the academy.

Bones's summary refers to the academy inexplicitly as "an intermediate stage" in candidate selection.

A situation in which only academy graduates could fight winnable seats would – aside from sending an embarrassing public message about the party's view of its own prospects in every other seat – make it essential that academy entry and assessment criteria were fair and transparent. Loose talk about "Nick wants his people in

these seats", as has been heard by some, is scarcely likely to reassure doubters.

And doubters there are, despite much of Bones's report being eminently sensible and, on the face of it, in places devolutionist.

This springs partly from its content but mainly from the ham-fisted way in which it has been handled. As Liberator 327 noted, the FE was invited to give up its powers on the basis of a summary and members were not even given the full report until the end of their meeting.

Federal Conference Committee members who objected to the same treatment were startled to be told by Bones that their insignificance was such that they could consider themselves lucky that he had discussed the report with them at all.

The Bournemouth conference has been invited to debate the same summary as the FE saw, with the 90-page full version still heavily restricted.

Liberator understands that this is not because it contains confidential financial information, or criticism of any named person. Nor should it contain sensitive political judgements, as it was never Bones's task to make assessments of, for example, the winnability of various seats, something that might reasonably remain confidential.

It is no wonder that suspicions are rife when party members are being asked to accept and act on the findings of a document they are not allowed to read.

HOW THEY ARE RELATED

All leaders sooner or later vanish into a bunker, surrounded by trusted associates who keep out those who might tell them what they don't want to hear, even if they need to hear it.

Nick Clegg's is assembling fast. Some members are obvious, such as the other new intake MPs Danny Alexander, Willie Rennie and Mark Hunter. In addition to his staff, there are also the donors to his private office Neil Sherlock and Duncan Greenland.

One common factor among some members is the Hansard Society, an obscure if worthy body, which claims to be the country's "leading independent, non-partisan political research and education charity".

Its object is to "strengthen parliamentary democracy and encourage greater public involvement in politics".

To help in this lofty aim, it has an advisory council on which dwell Richard Allen, Gavin Grant and John Sharkey. Clegg was a member before he became leader.

Allen was Clegg's predecessor as Lib Dem MP for Sheffield Hallam, ran his leadership campaign and remains close to him. Grant, just about the only known Lib Dem supporter of the Iraq war, has been prominent on the party's right-wing fringe for nearly 30 years, and has now found a niche advising on MPs' speeches.

Sharkey, who is reputed to meet Clegg daily, comes from the advertising industry, and ran the Conservatives' election advertising campaign in 1987 before switching and running the Lib Dems campaign in 1997.

His company is listed in the register of members' interests as a donor to Clegg's leadership campaign.

BEASTS OF BURDEN

Few people will have read right through *Make It Happen*, but those who have will doubtless have noticed the phrase, "We're looking for ways to cut Britain's overall tax burden."

This moves beyond redistribution from the rich to the poor (sorry, to 'struggling families'), since cuts can come either from our old friend 'waste' – most of which can be found in the Ministry of Defence's profligacy if any party had the balls to tackle that – or from public service cuts, about which the party is coy.

So coy in fact that, although Nick Clegg mentioned the 'overall burden' line in his launch speech to the media, it did not appear in *Liberal Democrat News*, or in the piece by Clegg's chief of staff Danny Alexander in the conference agenda, or in the motion for the conference debate on the document.

The party clearly does not wish to draw attention to the idea that its proposed tax cuts are not only those which are already policy, but those to be funded by as yet unspecified cuts in overall expenditure. Cock-up, or a conspiracy in the hope that this will go unnoticed by those who might object until it is too late?

HIGHLAND WISDOM

When *Liberator* reader David Grace was on holiday in the Scottish highlands some years ago, he paused in a museum to admire a picture of Russell Johnston, the former Liberal Democrat MP for Inverness (see obituary, page 26).

The curator enquired if he knew Johnston personally. Grace assured him he did, and remarked that Charles Kennedy now represented the area concerned.

A long silence followed. "Aye," said the sage curator. "Mr Kennedy has his good points too."

DEFINE YOUR TERMS

This year's award of the highly sought after Mitcham and Morden

Commemorative Gold Toilet goes to Bury St Edmunds for its feat in submitting the worst motion for Bournemouth.

Indeed, it is the gold toilet's silver jubilee, it having first been awarded in 1983 to Mitcham and Morden for a convoluted motion on the precise intervals to be permitted between public conveniences.

Bury St Edmunds's entry reads: "Bearing in mind the



Irish 'no' vote on the Lisbon Treaty should we abandon inter-government treaties negotiated at the national level in favour of allowing our elected representatives in the European Parliament to vote on the reform of the European Union in the simplest and clearest terms component part by component part. Yes or No?"

It is hard to know where to start on that. The use of 'should we' instead of 'we should' turns the whole thing from a motion to question, and who is to judge what would constitute 'simple' and 'clear' amid the complexity of drafting an international treaty?

CABLE ON THE AIR

There seems to be much jealousy in the leader's office at the amount of media coverage enjoyed by shadow chancellor Vince Cable.

The thinking goes that because the economy is the issue of the moment, the media turns to Cable, and that were he to pipe down, equivalent coverage would go to Clegg.

Cable gets coverage because, whether one agrees with him or not, he is clear, incisive, authoritative and speaks in concepts that voters can grasp. Perhaps if Clegg did the same, the party's leading figures could double their collective coverage.

HOW THE MIGHTY ARE FALLEN

Eastbourne was where, in 1986, the Liberal assembly threw out David Owen's ludicrous proposals for the Alliance to fight the coming general election on a platform of building Anglo-French nuclear weapons.

Ever since Screaming Lord Sutch destroyed the remnants of the SDP in the 1990 Bootle by-election, Owen has thankfully been an irrelevance in politics.

How much of an irrelevance can be judged by perusing *What's On in Eastbourne*, whose event listing notes that one can pay £20 for the privilege of an evening with Lord Owen in a theatre in nearby Tunbridge Wells, to hear him discuss his new book on politicians' ailments.

FLOGGING A DEAD HORSE

Labour's conference has a fringe meeting called 'Labour and the Lib Dems, allies or enemies', which is being held about ten years too late for Labour to have adopted electoral reform and so, potentially, have saved itself from the abyss it now faces.

The idea that the Lib Dems would be allies of a party that supports illegal warfare, ID cards and detests liberty is pretty far-fetched now, however things seemed during the Blair-Ashdown love-in.

Those due to debate this chestnut from the Labour side are ex-Liberal Peter Hain, little heard of in public life since the unpleasantness over his deputy leadership campaign donations, and arch-Blairite James Purnell.

The Lib Dems are represented, appropriately, by Sir Ming Campbell, whose inability to see Gordon Brown's July 2007 offer of cabinet posts for Lib Dems as an obvious political trap hastened his exit from the leadership.

Just think, the Lib Dems could have been basking in the reflected glory of this government.

READ THE SMALL PRINT

If those around Nick Clegg are so confident of the popularity of their new policy to reduce the overall tax burden, why have they used such underhand tactics to get it adopted by the party, asks Paul Holmes

Liberal Democrat party leaders and their predecessors have long complained about the party's policy making process and its culmination at conference. One legitimate complaint is about its length. No leader or spokesperson can respond to an urgent development or an opponent's policy initiative by telling parliament or the press: "Hang on a minute while I run that through the party's 18-month-long policy making machinery. I'll get back to you after next year's conference."

Necessarily snap responses, however, are expected to be in tune with previously agreed policy lines, and there's the problem. Those pesky conference delegates, we are told, can ambush the leadership and land them with 'mad' policies such as preventing cruelty to goldfish by banning them being used as prizes at fairs.

In fact that was not the result of a conference 'ambush' at all. This 'infamous' and completely sensible policy (in terms of preventing cruelty to animals, as John Stuart Mill told us we should in *On Liberty*) was actually a product of the 18-month process leading from working party via shadow cabinet, parliamentary party and Federal Policy Committee to conference.

Another leadership grumble has always been that conference delegates tend to act on all that stuff about 'one member one vote / members are at the core of the Liberal Democrats / members should have their say'. New Labour has completely emasculated its conference and the Tories have never pretended to submit policy to anything as 'vulgar' as membership sanction.

UNCOMFORTABLE ISSUES

Liberal Democrats alone can legitimately boast of the democracy and accountability embedded in their constitution. No surprise then, that delegates sometimes want to discuss 'uncomfortable' issues like faith schools or drugs policy.

Different leaders have dealt with the issue of conference in different ways. Backroom 'strategists' have often urged a deliberate 'back me or sack me' confrontational route, although leaders have usually had more sense than to adopt such a risky approach. Ming for example wrote in 2006 that "The Liberal Democrat conference makes policy. Its debates are meaningful and its decisions binding. It means that as the leader of the party and chair of the Federal

Policy Committee, I don't just announce proposals and expect you to go along with them like the Conservative and Labour party leaders. I need to win your approval for the platform on which we will fight the next general election."

Paddy of course was famous for leading from the front – so far out in front that his MPs often had to find out what was happening from the newspapers. The weekly parliamentary party meetings, I am told, could be very fraught affairs, as MPs waved that morning's newspaper stories of the latest No.10 deals on potential coalitions or joint working. Conference responded to all that, of course, by introducing the triple lock procedure, which ensures that wide party consultation is required in future before any such deal can be enacted. The prospect of a balanced parliament is more likely than ever within the next two years, as Labour only has to lose a little over 30 seats to lose power but the Tories would have to win a record-breaking 130 plus to win a majority of one. Such a momentous swing has been achieved only twice before in the last century – in 1906 and in 1945. Journalists in heady pursuit of coalition stories should remember therefore that the triple lock still applies and that Liberal Democrat conferences cannot be ignored in the pursuit of ministerial limos.

Are we, though, witnessing a new approach to making policy now? That of slipping things through in the small print? At the spring conference, a new health paper was adopted. It was full of excellent radical material on devolving power to locally elected health boards and ending central government diktat. A revolution that would decentralise power, decision-taking and accountability in what is currently the largest and most monolithic single employer in Europe. A truly Liberal Democrat approach and a credit to Norman Lamb as health spokesman.

BURIED CONTROVERSY

However, buried within it, not mentioned at all in the conference motion and given just three short paragraphs in the conference speech, was a small section on an innocent sounding Patient Contract. In the post-conference policy summary published in May, this low-key item was suddenly promoted to being one of the top three headline policies. Involving, as it does, setting a waiting time for all treatments and paying for patients to go private if they are not met, it could just be a little controversial among our members.

At this autumn's conference, we have a similar example of policy understatement in a key area. *Make it Happen* is another excellent document full of radical Liberal Democrat policies and a credit to Nick and his team – especially Danny Alexander who oversaw its production. Many of these policies are not new, far from it. But just because Labour has failed to see the light and steal them from us over the last 11

years does not make them any less fresh, radical or vitally needed to transform our society. That journalists react with surprise is a tribute to the quality of the document and also an indictment of their short memories.

If *Make it Happen* is such an excellent document, what then is the problem? Buried within its 4,000 or so words are just 20 innocuous words with a huge portent, rather like the 'Patient Contract' in the health paper. "If there's money to spare, we won't simply spend it. We're looking for ways to cut Britain's overall tax burden."

Such an innocuous statement, so easy to miss amongst the other 4,000 words.

It isn't a headline, it isn't in bold, it isn't underlined. There is nothing to make it stand out from the surrounding existing policy on changing the tax and benefits system to benefit low instead of high earners, or replacing council tax, or Vince's brilliant critique of Northern Rock. But if this conference lets it slip through as a tiny low-key part of the larger document, it will actually represent one of the most seismic shifts in party policy that I have ever witnessed.

Make it Happen was launched to the press on the morning of 17 July when most of our MPs were travelling to an 'away day', which would stretch from Thursday to Friday lunchtime and so keep most away from the press outlets. With parliament only meeting for one day the following week, before the long summer recess, most of our MPs would not in fact be together again until Bournemouth. So how was *Make it Happen* presented to the press and how did they report it the next morning? Did they focus on all the green policies, the transformation of the NHS, pensions, care for the elderly, foreign policy, scrapping 150 MPs, electoral reform, education?

Let's see: "Yesterday... Mr Clegg... signalled that the party would seek to cut taxes overall... it is no mere shift of emphasis that the Liberal Democrats will seek to return money to taxpayers rather than spend it on social programmes. This is a significant change." *The Times*.

"At last there is a political party in Britain that will campaign unashamedly for lower taxes. Astonishingly a party leader has had the guts to say the unsayable: public spending is too high and should be cut. Sadly that party leader is Nick Clegg, not David Cameron. ...It marks the triumph of the so-called 'Orange Booker' tendency within the Liberal Democrats, who are to all intents and purposes small state, liberal conservatives." *The Daily Telegraph*

"Nick Clegg yesterday broke the cross party consensus on the size of the state, committing the Liberal Democrats to reducing the overall burden of taxation." *Financial Times*

"Mr Clegg's pledge to cut the tax burden contrasts sharply with David Cameron who warned earlier this week that tax rises may be necessary and that the state of the

"Are we though witnessing a new approach to making policy now? That of slipping things through in the small print?"

economy meant no guarantees of tax cuts were possible." *The Independent*.

Now let's be clear, I am not disagreeing with the policy of cutting the basic rate of income tax to 16p, the lowest rate since 1916, and paying for it by the green tax switch and by removing tax loopholes and benefits enjoyed by high earners. Indeed, some noted with surprise (because it involved abandoning the

proposed 50p top tax rate that was so popular in the 2005 election) that I stood up at a previous conference and argued successfully for the adoption of exactly that policy. Neither do I have a problem with funding desirable public spending (such as more police, more education spending, better pensions, abolishing tuition fees) by scrapping less desirable Labour government spending (such as ID Cards, Baby Bonds, the third tranche of Eurofighter and so on), rather than via tax increases. In fact, in Vince's pursuit of the £16bn of spending to switch, I could give him a few new suggestions such as not building new nuclear warheads or Trident submarines and the £0.3bn the government gives to a supposedly self-funding charity that promotes academies.

UNDER THE RADAR

What concerns me is the brand new and drastic change of policy that was slipped into *Make it Happen* under the radar and then spun to the press when all the MPs were out of the way and before being approved by conference. Now we are suddenly pursuing £20bn of spending 'cuts' and the extra £4bn, or some of it – or more, the details are non-existent – is to go in reducing the overall tax burden.

No one wants to pay tax, especially if it is being wasted on failed IT schemes, illiberal ID Cards, botched medical contracts and so on. But our tax burden at 36.8% of GDP is lower than in eight of the last 27 years, is 15th out of 30 OECD countries and has only just reached the Western European average.

The economy is now worsening and tax receipts therefore falling. Would low and middle income earners be helped more by a small further cut on top of the reduction to 16p (remember £4bn does not even equal 1p on/off income tax), or would the money be more effective being spent on rationed NHS drugs, or abolishing all prescription charges (half a billion), or cutting class sizes, or providing better child care, or more and greener public transport or better equipment for front line troops? These are difficult questions but need debating up front, in detail and without generalisations about massive tax burdens, which are actually average tax burdens compared to equivalent countries.

This is far too important an issue to be slipped through as 20 words in a 4,000-word document.

Paul Holmes is Liberal Democrat MP for Chesterfield and was chair of the parliamentary party from 2005-07

NUANCED TO DEATH

‘Make it Happen’ is more evidence that the Liberal Democrats are fatally risk averse, argues Simon Titley

Political strategy. It’s not difficult. Answer these four questions, in this order: What is the party for (purpose)? Who is the party for (beneficiaries)? What action should the party take (priorities)? What resources does the party need to achieve its objectives (means)? If your answers are rational, you have the basis of a coherent strategy.

Make it Happen, launched by the Liberal Democrats on 17 July, is not a strategy document but it reveals a good deal about what the party imagines its strategy to be.

The document has been variously described as ‘a statement of the party’s vision and values’ or a ‘pre-manifesto’. It was launched amid much rattling of tambourines within the party, but if it sets your pulse racing, you really should get out more often. *Make it Happen* is simply dreadful. It is dreadful mainly because it commits the cardinal sin evident in most of the party’s communications: it is inoffensive. It is governed by an overriding desire to please everybody. It is nuanced where it should be pithy, contrite where it should be assertive, consensual where it should be controversial. The rhetorical phrase du jour among the party’s leadership is ‘tough choices’, yet this document displays a marked reluctance to take any (not unless you count the cynical introduction by stealth of a new tax policy).

As I never tire of arguing, one cannot attract without also repelling. The party should have learnt that by now. The Liberal Democrats possess reams of policies but just about the only one that has had any significant effect on the party’s vote is opposition to the war in Iraq. This policy had an impact because it was controversial at the time and distinct from what the other parties were saying.

Likewise, the only Liberal Democrat MP who consistently achieves good media coverage is Vince Cable. Why? Because he makes statements that are not only authoritative and concise but also bold. He is not afraid to tell some home truths. Only recently has it become accepted wisdom to talk of a recession. Cable was unfashionably warning of that danger more than two years ago. He predicted that the mortgage and credit binge would end in tears, and he was doing so uninhibited by the Daily Mail arguing that ever-rising house prices were an Englishman’s birthright.

But *Make it Happen* fails to be distinctive. Its conciliatory tone lacks passion; a more accurate title would be ‘Make it Happen (if that’s alright with you)’. Worse, it is being touted in some quarters as a ‘narrative’. Read David Boyle’s articles (Liberator 304 in particular, also

319 and 325) to grasp why it is not. If the party thinks it has ticked that box, boy are we in trouble.

Make it Happen also suffers from the problem identified by Ros Scott (Liberator 327): that a desire to sound like a ‘party of government’ produces worthy but dull policies. The party is under the illusion that, to sound serious, it must sound ponderous. The Liberal Democrats have grown out of being a party of protest and should aspire to being a party of government. They have forgotten that, in making this transition, there is a vital intermediate stage; to learn how to be a party of opposition. Hence the lack of a killer punch.

The flaws in *Make it Happen* are consequently not an isolated drafting error but symptomatic of the party’s ills and can be traced back to a failure to answer adequately the four basic questions listed at the beginning of this article (a failure that is nothing new and which has existed throughout the party’s history).

WHAT IS THE PARTY FOR?

The party must have a sense of purpose, a point to its existence. That purpose is to put its philosophy into practice. This philosophy – Liberalism – stems from an idea of what life is for. Each person has only a few years on this planet and, in the limited time available, most seek to live a good life. But because each of us has a unique personality, only one person can decide what constitutes a good life, and that is ourselves. However, we cannot make those decisions unless we possess ‘agency’, the ability to make real and meaningful choices about our lives. That is the logic underlying our belief in liberty. The party’s central purpose is therefore to enable everyone to determine their own lives.

This philosophy is controversial. It is popular in some quarters and not in others. But that is only to be expected. Politics implies the existence of alternatives. Liberals should have something distinctive to offer in the marketplace of ideas and not assume that everybody is amenable to their messages. Indeed, if they are forthright in the expression of their values, Liberals will meet outright hostility, particularly from powerful people who seek to monopolise agency for their own selfish ends, or from those who believe that the individual’s overriding duty is to obey authority or tradition.

Of course, the party should not express the concept of ‘agency’ in abstract or academic terms in its everyday statements. But the idea should be evident as a consistent thread running through its values, policy and communications. And it is an idea that resonates with many people. There is a growing sense of alienation and

insecurity, social bonds are disintegrating, lives are becoming dislocated, and people feel that nothing they say or do makes any difference.

Does *Make it Happen* express such a consistent thread? Not really. There are repeated references to the need for politicians to “listen” but is this really the problem? Far from politicians not listening, they have never listened more. In the 1950s, most MPs put in only token appearances in their constituencies, while local councillors were never seen from one election to the next. Yet electoral turnouts and party memberships were at an all-time high. Nowadays, most elected politicians conduct regular surgeries and carry unprecedented loads of casework; they are accessible online via e-mails, websites and blogs; they deliver leaflets and appear regularly in the local media; and they conduct frequent surveys and polls. It is impossible to move without bumping into some politician or other wanting to “feel your pain”. Yet people still moan that politicians are “out of touch”.

There is obviously a widespread sense of powerlessness and a real problem of alienation, but given all the listening that is going on, it is not clear that more of it is the solution. Might the real problems lay deeper? Might the problem be centralisation and gigantism, in both the public and private sectors, which move all the important decisions out of people’s hands? Might the problem be the replacement of significant political choices with trivial consumerist ones? Might the problem be the replacement of social relationships with economic relationships, leading to a loss of social solidarity? Might the problem with politicians be their unwillingness to offer moral leadership? Might an honest analysis of why society is atomising be too radical for some people in the party to stomach?

And if there is an overriding need to reconnect citizens to the democratic system, why stress, as *Make it Happen* does, a bizarre policy to reduce the House of Commons by 150 MPs, which would increase the number of voters in each constituency by about 30%? Why 150? Why not 83 or 237? 150 sounds like a figure plucked out of thin air to appease the anti-democratic sentiments of the tabloids.

Worst of all, *Make it Happen* is suffused with the tired old promise that the Liberal Democrats, unlike the other parties, will fix everything for you. There is no recognition that the inability of politicians to meet everybody’s demands is at the root of popular dissatisfaction with the whole democratic process. If the party seriously wants to make it happen, it must stop treating voters as supplicants, admit that politicians can’t solve everyone’s problems, and declare that empowerment means people must get off their arses and contribute to society rather than expect merely to consume.

WHO IS THE PARTY FOR?

No matter what values they espouse or policies they adopt, each political party will tend to benefit some people and disadvantage others. The Liberal Democrats, whatever they like to think, are no different.

From the 1920s to the 1970s, the Liberals were in the wilderness precisely because they lacked an interest base. This heritage has left the Liberal Democrats with a marked objection to the idea of being partisan, of being defined by sectional interests, expressed in the ridiculous slogan, “We can win everywhere”.

The party refuses to acknowledge that its values and policies are consonant with the interests of some people

rather than others, but the voters understand. The results of recent elections, polls and surveys show where the Liberal Democrats’ natural constituency can be found: among voters who are younger, better educated and more cosmopolitan than average (my articles in *Liberator* 308 and 322 explain why).

Despite this, the party made an eccentric decision to pitch its 2005 general election manifesto at the elderly, the demographic group least likely to vote Liberal Democrat. It made no difference. The party still performed best among voters aged under 35 (out-polling the Tories among 18-35s) and worst among those over 65.

Make it Happen suggests where the Liberal Democrats have chosen to make their pitch at the next election. It is that old chestnut, the ‘hard working family’. The phrase actually used is ‘ordinary families’ but it amounts to the same. It is code for the ‘centre ground’ and can mean only one thing; the party intends to compete with Labour and the Tories on the same narrow, crowded territory. Such convergence is a disastrous strategy because it prevents the party saying anything distinctive. It is a sure-fire recipe for being blanded out.

There are other unpleasant ‘dog whistles’ in *Make it Happen*. In the section headed “Why have we lost our sense of community?”, where one might have expected a more cogent analysis, the key policy highlighted in bold text is a proposal to introduce “proper border checks”. Meanwhile, the only policy mentioned relating to the European Union is a call for a referendum. The stress laid on these two policies suggests a desire to appease xenophobic UKIP voters rather than enthuse the party’s base. This cheap bid will impress no-one. It indicates a chronic lack of confidence in the party’s values.

OTHER QUESTIONS

As for the remaining two of the four questions in the opening paragraph, here’s an executive summary of the answer: Testicles. Acquire some.

In the meantime, we are faced with a conference debate on *Make it Happen*. The motion has been contrived to be virtually unamendable. There will likely be no real debate, just a succession of second-rate PPCs competing to rattle their tambourines the loudest. But the inevitable vote of approval will be a pyrrhic victory.

Presumably the Liberal Democrats wish to revive democratic politics. But *Make it Happen* wills the ends without the means. A revival of real politics is not possible without fighting a battle of ideas over competing visions of how to organise society. *Make it Happen* is hamstrung by its reluctance to criticise the prevailing consensus of economism. Instead, we have a flaccid collection of nuanced platitudes engineered by the right-wing PR men surrounding the leader, whose first instinct is to extinguish the fire in the party’s belly lest it offend the Daily Mail or Daily Express.

Make it Happen lacks vigour, rigour or risk. Gerald Kaufman once famously described Labour’s 1983 manifesto as “the longest suicide note in history”. This pre-manifesto is merely the sound of a party quietly sticking its head in the gas oven and hoping no-one will notice.

Simon Titley is a member of the *Liberator* Collective

SPENDING CAN 'MAKE IT HAPPEN'

Richard Grayson says that Liberal Democrats should reject plans to cut public spending overall

Make it Happen is not a bad document. In fact, much of it is very good, both content and presentation. But in roughly 4,000 words, most of which the party will endorse wholeheartedly, 21 words mark a significant shift in the direction of the party and the debates we will be having at conference in September: “We’re looking for ways to cut Britain’s overall tax burden, so ordinary families have more of their money to help themselves.”

Let’s be clear what this means. We already have policy for tax cuts, funded either by redistributive taxes on the wealthy, or by green taxes. There is nothing wrong with that. Reducing the overall tax ‘burden’ goes a step further, funding yet more tax cuts by reducing the money that government can spend on the things that individuals have decided are best provided collectively, like schools, hospitals, pensions, unemployment benefits, disability allowances, police, and the armed forces.

For nearly twenty years, the Liberal Democrats have argued that not enough is spent on public services. Since our first general election as Liberal Democrats, we have argued for some specific increases in expenditure, funded from extra taxation. There was a shift from this position under Ming Campbell’s leadership when, instead of proposing an overall increase in spending, the party adopted a more redistributive tax policy than we had previously adopted. Only two years on, the party is being asked to make a further shift, one that suggests we now believe that *too much* is being spent overall and that cuts should be made in order to fund more tax cuts (*more* than those we already propose), rather than to spend on other priorities.

A PROFOUND MISTAKE

I believe that such a profound shift in policy would be profound mistake. But before I outline the case for that view, I want to be clear on two points. First, it is not necessary to reduce spending to cut taxes. That can be done through tax changes, where the rich or polluters pay more, and the poorest pay less. Second, nobody who wants to keep public spending at the current level is saying that every penny is now spent wisely. Indeed, some of us have a strong pedigree in arguing quite the reverse.

In my time as the party’s director of policy, Matthew Taylor was the first Liberal Democrat shadow chancellor to ask our parliamentary portfolio teams to come up with savings to spend on Liberal Democrat priorities. Those of us involved in that process were firmly of the view, and I remain of that view now, that we should scrutinise every

item of government expenditure. We have different priorities to Labour, so it follows that we should spend money differently.

I emphasise these points because there is a danger of the party being presented with false choices. A letter in *Liberal Democrat News* (8 August 2008) from Julian Tisi, PPC for Windsor, responded to earlier letters that criticised *Make it Happen*. Julian focused entirely on the merits of the tax cuts we already propose, yet that is not what this debate is about. Meanwhile, David Boyle’s blog of 25 July, ‘Why Clegg is right about tax’, argued that accepting Gordon Brown’s spending levels’ means accepting “without question” both “his view of efficiency” based on centralised spending and “his white elephants” such as ID cards. On both points, I am afraid that David’s logic is (unusually) wrong. We do not have to accept that the kind of centralism espoused by Labour is correct because we would devolve funds (and better still the power to raise those funds) to let communities decide for themselves on how to spend them. Meanwhile, we are not saddled with Brown’s ‘white elephants’ because we can cancel them and spend the money in any way we like – as we have already proposed in respect of ID cards.

So let’s be clear. Those who oppose reducing the overall level of public spending are not signing up for every digit of Labour spending, and we are not against redistributive tax cuts. Instead, there are three central arguments for maintaining current levels of public spending.

The first is that spending since 1997 (or rather since the significant increases following 2001) has made a difference for the better in public services. Our schools and hospitals are immeasurably better than they would have been had the Conservatives won again in 1997. Anyone with any real personal experience of the state education system will tell you this. We have seen smaller class sizes for many children, vastly improved resources from books to computers, and a level of training for teachers that betters anything the country has ever known. The differences compared with 1997 are stark. When I look back to my own time as a pupil at a comprehensive school (which was then considered ‘good’ and relatively well resourced) in the 1980s, the differences are immeasurable. The same differences can be seen in the NHS, though too much of that remains under-resourced.

SPENDING HAS NOT FAILED

So, I am afraid, I take some issue with Nick Clegg’s statement on launching *Make it Happen* when he said that Labour’s “decade long experiment in trying to change things by pouring money in through a funnel in Number 10

Downing Street has failed". Yes, central direction from Number 10 has failed, but spending in its own right has not failed. Moreover, I cannot accept the view expressed by Boyle in his blog that there is "very little to show" for this spending. The failures that have occurred – teaching to the test in schools, distortions in clinical priorities in hospitals, and often meaningless targets everywhere – have been down to the way money has been spent, not because money has achieved little.

The answer to these problems is to reduce the rules, not the spending. We have, as Nick Clegg wrote in the *Guardian* (1 July 2008) a few weeks before the launch of *Make it Happen*, a different approach to tackling social injustice. Nick wrote about "The Liberal Democrats' belief in personal empowerment, in localising our public services and in community control is grounded in our belief that it is by giving individuals real control over their lives that we can create opportunities for all." We all agree with this, and the liberal vision Nick set out was entirely coherent without any mention of reducing spending overall, which was not part of that article.

The second case for maintaining current overall spending is that there are many areas in which the Liberal Democrats would like to spend more money than the government currently does. Again, I agree with Nick Clegg (in fact, we co-wrote a pamphlet on this subject in 2002). Nick has argued that some schools – in particular, some pupils – need more money spending on them. In the *Guardian* on 5 June 2008, while arguing that "more public spending is not the answer to every problem in the public services", Nick wrote that "when it comes to education, money does matter". He highlighted the differences between the private and state sectors, and argued "that extra education spending targeted on those youngsters most in need can make a real and measurable difference".

Absolutely, but this is only the beginning of where we need to spend at levels that exceed the government: scrapping university tuition fees (and why should we not also scrap such fees in further education?), better pensions, and more investment in public transport. Meanwhile, we still have fewer doctors, oncologists and radiographers than the Western European average, larger class sizes than the Western European average, far inferior state support for childcare provision, and one of the worst state pensions in Western Europe.

Do we really believe that the overall level of government spending is such a problem that reducing it should come before tackling these problems? It may be that some extra spending – perhaps much of it – can be funded by making savings in existing budgets. But if we want truly decent public services, we have to put all of these issues as priorities ahead of reducing spending overall.

"Our schools and hospitals are immeasurably better than they would have been had the Conservatives won again in 1997"

Inevitably, such a list of problems has led on to comparisons with other countries, which is the third strand of the argument for current spending levels. Some may wonder why, when we have reached average levels of public spending of comparator countries, we do not have their relatively high educational and health outcomes? There is one factor underpinning these outcomes. Countries with better outcomes are generally more equal societies. Research presented at the party's one-day manifesto conference in January this year by Professor Richard Wilkinson of the University

of Nottingham suggests that not only to the poorest do better in more equal countries, but so do the wealthiest. Comparing Sweden to the USA, levels of literacy are higher in Sweden in both the poorest and wealthiest sections of society when compared with the USA.

Underpinning the equality factor is the fact that countries like Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands have had decade-on-decades of high levels of investment in public services. Now that we have just reached these levels, it is not time to row back, simply because spending has not delivered a quick fix since 2001. Inter-generational inequality will take decades to eradicate, especially in such a class-ridden society as our own, and we therefore need to sustain spending for decades to fund the decent services that we all want. We have a clear choice here: we can have US health and educational outcomes if we want US levels of government spending, or we can have something better.

There are, of course, political arguments in favour of opposing cuts in public spending. As Liberator 327 said of tax cuts, "Thanks in part to earlier Lib Dem campaigning successes, many voters will simply interpret that as meaning poorer public services." We can avoid that accusation if we are clear – and we have recent policy on this – that tax cuts for the poorest will be funded by closing loopholes that affect the richest, and by taxing polluters. Yet we get into much more difficult territory when we are talking about spending cuts.

However, for most in the party, the gravest objections to reducing spending will be ones of both principle and practicality, not politics: spending *has* made a difference, and money can *continue* to make a difference. The party now should not question spending *overall*, but show how we can do it in a better, more *liberal* way so that people not ministers decide how it is spent.

Dr Richard Grayson is Liberal Democrat prospective parliamentary candidate for Hemel Hempstead, where he stood in 2005

NOT A PENNY MORE

The next general election will be fought mainly on the economy, and the Liberal Democrats must establish themselves as the party that will tax fairly to spend what is necessary, says Alan Sherwell

Liberator suggested in its Commentary (Liberator 327) that no-one in the Lib Dems knows how to respond to a failing Labour government, adding that previously when Labour failed, we did worse.

Certainly we have no experience of turning Labour failure at a national level into Lib Dem success, but it is not necessarily so. The key structural difference compared to previous Labour collapses is that we now have a credible presence on the ground in a significant number of Labour-held seats. Indeed, in 2005, we did manage to gain when Labour fell back, although, of course, that was no great collapse.

Iraq and tuition fees did create special circumstances. However, we didn't choose them as election issues, we just happened to have a couple of policies that were quintessentially liberal, developed because we firmly believed them to be right rather than as vote winners.

Fortunately, they caught the public mood too but that wasn't why we had them. The other advantage of those policies was that they appealed to both Labour and Tory voters. Their supporters were approximately equally likely to be opposed to the war, and student fees hit both the generally uncommitted young and their Tory-voting parents who ended up paying for their education.

It is not given to any person to know in advance on what the next election will be fought and we won't be able to impose our choice on the media. However, given what is happening at the moment, managing the economy seems to be the frontrunner. Saving the planet is a distant second and little else is in the frame. Given how fundamentally a failing economy impacts on people, it is a good bet that this will not change substantially by 2010.

TACKLING A SLUMP

So we need to have sane economic policies to tackle the slump and a sensible environmental agenda that will not exacerbate the economic downturn. Traditionally the public has seen us as weak on financial issues but need this be so at the next election? Is there any doubt which of Alistair Darling, George Osborne or Vince Cable is the most effective economist?

Cable is an enormous asset to the party, especially at the moment, because he can put over complex issues in a way that people understand and has a record of getting it right. Vince was banging on about the debt crisis and the extent to which many people were horrendously over-extended two years before the sub-prime crash. The party needs to keep reminding folk of that. He also saw the right answer for Northern Rock straight away. There were only ever two

options – let it go bust or take it over. Given that no sensible government could let a major bank go bust, Northern Rock had to be saved and, given that that involved oodles of public money, it was essential that the public got control of the bank in exchange. Labour, of course, adopted the worst line – throw public money at the problem without taking control – and eventually was forced to do the right thing rather too late and at too great a total cost. The Tories were all over the shop on the issue. The party needs to keep reminding people of that too.

The other bit of economic history that we need to be banging on about is the Tory record, which many did not experience and the rest seem to have forgotten. Current levels of interest rates are very low compared with the nadir of Tory economic mismanagement, so are unemployment and home repossessions. Of course, it is possible that the basic Tory attitude to the economy, which caused these problems, has changed but does anyone seriously believe that?

However, we can't fight the next election on a slogan of 'Remember Norman Lamont'. The past is but one part of showing that we can manage the future and that is where the hoary old question of "are we a high tax or a low tax party" comes in. People agonise over this, but surely the answer is 'no' or, to put it another way, it is a stupid question.

Surely we are actually a 'right tax' party. We do not want to take a penny more from folk than is needed to run the services that we believe to be necessary.

In the past, the Tories have talked about reducing taxes without reducing services and everyone laughed. Labour has changed this – it is collecting almost exactly twice as much in tax as when it came to power. Of course, some of that is eaten up by inflation but a lot is not. Who outside the cabinet thinks that public services have improved? In any event, going into an election, when most people's standard of living will have fallen for the last couple of years, promising to increase tax isn't going to be a winner any more than saying that we will reduce services, which will be needed more urgently, would be.

We need a policy to provide the public services that many disillusioned voters want, without alienating the middle class core vote that we have now and which the Tories are attacking. And it can't simply be by a mantra of "we would do things more efficiently". That means tax and tax changes have to be seen to be fair and we have to demonstrate that proposed savings come from genuine efficiencies – if we are to abolish X, then we must

demonstrate that X is unnecessary or that its benefits can be gained in a better way.

We need to ask why certain types of tax should be preferred. The traditional answer from other parties has usually been because it was easy to get away with or, in Labour's case, is so complicated that no one understands what was happening. A liberal tax should do at least one of four things – relate to people's ability to pay (income tax); tax unearned income/wealth (land value tax/SVR); directly affect people's behaviour in a positive way (tobacco tax); or attempt to correct a market price that classical economics sets too low because not all the relevant factors are immediately apparent (e.g. the cost of minerals does not reflect their long-term scarcity but rather their short-term abundance).

Income tax is the tax that affects most people most visibly. We should be saying:

- it is wrong that anyone on the minimum wage is paying income tax;
- the vast majority of allowances should be swept away;
- a proportion of the resources saved by the above simplification should be used to combat evasion;
- we will restructure benefits to minimise the poverty trap

– much easier to do when people on the minimum wage aren't paying income tax.

UNDERSTANDABLE POLICY

It may not be possible to do this in a single budget but it would form the core of an understandable policy that most people would accept. No one likes paying income tax, but the principle of taxing according to income is generally accepted. What is more difficult to understand is why people who are receiving inadequate wages still pay tax on them (the 10p rate abolition row is the prime example – another blunder that the Lib Dems picked up on first) and why the rich can often avoid paying at all. A situation where tax lawyers earn a fortune advising people how to avoid tax legally is absurd. If we sweep away the vast majority of things that can be claimed against tax, then we can redeploy tax officers to tackling evasion and most people will thank us and we will get more money in – enabling tax to be reduced elsewhere.

Environmental taxes are the other area where it is possible to make tax more acceptable because people now understand, at least theoretically, the need to reduce environmental damage as a matter of urgency. However, this government is bringing environmental tax into disrepute by its mishandling of fuel duty and car tax, combined with its complete failure to take actions to tackle environmental problems on a wider front. The case for environmental taxation is largely accepted in theory but is undermined in practice when 'bash the motorist' seems to be the only environmental policy that the government has.

“Surely we are actually a ‘right tax’ party. We do not want to take a penny more from folk than is needed to run the services that we believe to be necessary”

So why not take some simple, straightforward measures:

- impose an immediate tax of at least 10p on plastic bags;
- ban illuminated shop signs at least when the unit concerned is shut, and possibly altogether;
- change planning law so that all new buildings have to include grey water re-use or rainfall collection and either solar water heating or solar power generation;
- require that all developments over a certain size include measures going beyond those mentioned above to reduce or eliminate their carbon footprint.

That is not a comprehensive list (I haven't the space) and the point of the first two is not that they have a massive impact but that they show that government is tackling the issue itself and not simply leaving it to others. The latter two will, of course, lead to the construction industry claiming that it is an unfair burden on them in a time of housing 'crisis'.

The housing 'crisis' has really been caused by unwise developers paying landowners over-the-top prices, and sustained by irresponsible mortgage lending policies. The market will not move again unless land prices are driven down to the correct economic level. These additional costs are marginal in that context – indeed these requirements would actually drive down the price of the relevant technologies since they would have a larger guaranteed market. Whatever happens, new houses must be more environmentally efficient and that cannot be left to the trade and local planning committees, whose reasonable decisions are often overturned by government inspectors.

The easiest way to revive the housing market is to let local authorities borrow to buy houses to let. That would be a better risk for banks, reduce job losses and help tackle the waiting lists that have built up as a result of council house sales.

Finally, we need to ditch centrally imposed targets. Targets concentrate organisational effort on the things being measured and, when externally imposed, distort or override local priorities. Local government is spending vast sums simply measuring what it is told to measure, so are the education and the health service – and it has done little to improve any of them.

Of course, accountable public services must publish performance data but there is no need for rafts of centrally demanded statistics, which take no account of local circumstance and pressures. Let us get rid of most of them, and the associated costly audit regime.

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

DEAR TAVISH...

Don't choose your coalition partners in advance and don't freeze out any section of your party, Andy Myles advises new Scottish Liberal Democrat leader Tavish Scott in an open letter

Congratulations on winning the leadership of the Scottish Liberal Democrats. I'm certain that you are well up to the job and can deliver for us all. I was a Ross Finnie supporter in the contest, but I was campaigning for an old friend and not against anyone.

The campaigns were good in my view and allowed us a fairly thorough debate on what direction the party should head in. It allowed me certainly to shape ideas about current problems and issues facing us. Your having won, and with a plurality, I'm going to take the opportunity open to any member of the party to offer his or her advice to the new leader, given in the form of some of the thinking I've done.

The first thing that came out of the campaign was that everyone agreed that the constitutional issue – for all of its superficial dominance of Scottish politics and our media – is really very low on the people of Scotland's list of priorities.

I'm convinced, and all of the candidates appeared to be under the same impression, that people are fairly satisfied with the Holyrood arrangements – and they want to see our politicians getting on with the bread and butter issues affecting their lives. So make these issues the core of your work.

SMALL REVOLUTION

For example, housing is an issue that you highlighted. Let's get back to the days of radical liberal policies on housing to solve the remaining blight of appallingly bad housing, growing homelessness and shortages of social housing, and let's tackle the simple fact that the Scottish establishment (and especially the civil service) seems immune to the idea that in fact environmental standards in Scotland's housing are terribly poor and require desperately to be improved.

The Scottish Parliament can make a small revolution in a policy area like housing. Let's do it. Let's use the advantages of a political system that is actually very close to people and the expertise of the civic sector to create radical, imaginative solutions to very real problems.

We should concentrate on taking each such area of policy responsibility in the parliament and take the same approach. It can be done with health, the environment, economic development, energy, schools, colleges, universities, tourism, transport and all the other areas that the devolution settlement has already demonstrated the capacity to really allow us to make our own decisions, appropriate to our own circumstances and country, within our own budget and with a bit of flair and originality.

We should use the model of the very detailed manifesto from the 2003 elections rather than the much more bland 2007 document. We know that the way to negotiate a serious platform for delivery in government is to have done the preparatory work and have the details in place. That way we can dominate any partnership agreement negotiations should the parliamentary arithmetic offer the prospect of a government determined to deliver an properly agreed programme.

GROSS IMMATURITY

Which brings me to the questions of our politics of negotiation. Thus far, Liberal Democrats have quietly delivered more than any other party since 1999 because we understand the logic of a PR system. You have to be good at negotiation to get what you want in a politics of permanent negotiation. But you also have to have a stable governmental platform if you are to deliver in any volume. The 2007 result simply did not allow a stable government unless three of the major parties were to be involved.

Well, we know that the Tories are still not ready for government at all and that the Labour/SNP playground hatred will not allow them to enter a coalition at Holyrood yet. Their gross immaturity is something we have to just accept for the next three years – but we must make it plain that, if the numbers stack up the same way again, Scotland deserves stable, multi-party government as opposed to the sham, minority non-government we are getting from the SNP.

We must, therefore, start to make some capital out of the fact that we are the only party mature enough to have thought this stuff through. We need to spell it out to our wilful media and hypocritical opponents that their immature antics are not good enough. They're not even good theatre. We must make a lot more of the SNP's hypocrisy in first telling us we would do anything for a ministerial Mondeo but then whinging that we wouldn't go into coalition with them, despite the fact that they were so pathetic as to be unable to see that a minority coalition would have been a disaster – and have proved once and for all that Liberal Democrats were indeed prepared to do anything for a role in government.

What I'm saying is this. We have to face up to it. In a PR system, we may well have to go into coalition with the Tories or Labour if we are to deliver – but we must also be prepared to do it with the Nationalists. Your ultra-unionist rhetoric notwithstanding (and it doesn't go down well with many members of your own party), we cannot and must not fall into the trap of choosing coalition partners first and

making our case second. We must make our case as loudly and clearly as possible, and then use the hand the electorate have dealt us to deliver Liberal Democracy as well as possible in the given circumstances. To do otherwise is to insult the electorate – and to stray from the logic of our own argument for an open democracy.

ENGLISH QUESTION

I'm not arguing that we should learn to love the nationalists. They want to build walls between people. We want to break them down. We understand the complexity of identity and community. They have got it all wrong when they affix exclusive primacy to Scottish identity. But without turning this into a crusade, or pretending that it is the burning issue of the moment, we do have one very major task on the constitutional issue if we are to be, in theory and practice, a truly federal party. That is, put bluntly, to be absolutely clear that, if we have largely solved the 'Scottish question', it has had a knock-on effect and we are now faced with a growing 'English question' that cannot be ignored. It will not go away. We have to help our colleagues in England to understand that the devolution of power from Westminster is less than complete. English devolution – within a European context – must be shaped to satisfy English identity and English community or the future of the UK itself is bleak.

All of this – the sharpening of a policy programme on bread and butter issues, the education of Scotland on the impact of PR and the development and delivery of true federalism in the UK of which we are still an important part – demands that we develop the dreaded 'narrative' that Ross kept banging on about. Ask the man or woman on the bus "what do the Liberal Democrats stand for"? We need to have an answer that trips off the tongue as easily as, and with greater integrity and intellectual rigour than, the platitudes with which our opponents could answer the

“In a PR system we may well have to go into coalition with the Tories or Labour if we are to deliver – but we must also be prepared to do it with the Nationalists”

question. And we don't have it! We know what we are about but the voters are often only very, very dimly aware if at all.

I know this was not your issue in the leadership campaign – but it can't be ignored just because you won. Which brings me to my last point. There are people in the party who are genuinely afraid that you are going to be exclusive – and lead the party from so far out in front that large sections are going to be out in the cold. Please prove them wrong. Leading Liberal Democrats is going to be like herding cats – frequently frustrating and always demanding – but we need all the cats. Skilled as a leader you might be, and with a group of talented friends, but we

don't have talent to waste in the party. We are far too small a player in Scottish politics for that. We need an inclusive style of leadership that leaves nobody out in the cold and uses every ounce of talent that we've got.

It is true that currently our internal mechanisms for delivering this sort of leadership need overhauled if it is to be delivered. The party machine has become too inflexible and lacking in co-ordination. This need fixing and, as we have a lull in our involvement in government, this is the time to do the job. We need to start from first principles and find ways of making the organism that is the Scottish Liberal Democrats work better. Please don't think that this can just be ignored, brushed off or over. It can't. Not without causing massive friction. The leader needs to be able to lead the cats – and that takes affection.

All the best with the job. You're a braver man than me to take it on!

Yours, Andy

Andy Myles was the chief executive of the Scottish Liberal Democrats from 1992-97, part of the negotiating team for coalitions in 1999 and 2003, and a special adviser to the deputy first minister from 2005-07

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THE STAKES ARE HIGH

The Liberal Democrat leadership must change its approach to the next European elections or the party risks humiliation, says Chris Davies

The 2009 elections will see the Liberal Democrats lose seats in the European Parliament unless the party injects passion and aggression into its campaigning style. The loss could be dismissed as a mere consequence of the overall reduction in UK representation from 78 to 72 MEPs but it won't feel like that to candidates in potentially winnable positions who narrowly fail to clear the hurdle. Many in the party will regard it as a missed opportunity.

British Liberal Democrats consistently underperform in European elections. In two of the past four contests, we have been beaten into fourth place; in 1989 by the Greens and in 2004 by the UK Independence Party. Our share of the vote – at less than 15% – limps miserably behind that achieved in local elections. It is self-evident that we do not achieve our potential. If we are to avoid contraction and instead increase our representation, we need a radical change in strategy.

Do not look for improvements through local or regional campaigning. By our usual standards, the very word 'campaigning' is a misnomer given the practical realities. Past experience suggests that there will be virtually no engagement in the European electoral process by activists of any of the main parties. The size of the Euro constituencies renders any special efforts made in Westminster target seats virtually irrelevant. Attempts to use local newspapers or the regional broadcasting media will be frustrated by the virtual wall of silence that editors erect whenever the word 'European' is mentioned.

The 2004 campaign in my North West region illustrates the difficulty. Technically it was as good as it got. Current party Director of Campaigns, Hilary Stephenson, served as agent and made efficient use of the freepost to ensure that as many leaflets as possible were delivered in those constituencies where Liberal Democrat support was known to be strong. We used the unique selling point of having an Asian and Muslim candidate in second place on the list to promote the party's opposition to the Iraq war and to appeal for support from sectional interests. These efforts happened to be sufficient to tip the balance and secure the election of two MEPs, but they raised our share of the vote by no more than 1%, compared with regions where much less was done. That figure would not be sufficient to enable us to win the same number of seats in 2009, let alone to make substantial gains.

The nature of the European elections has to be appreciated if we are to plan effectively. They are uniquely

dull. The outcome of national or municipal elections will determine the shape of an executive body, but when people elect MEPs they are merely influencing the balance in just one part of the EU's tripartite law-making structure. Individual MEPs can have greater legislative influence than their counterparts at Westminster but most voters find it impossible to get excited by an institutional process that is remote and largely unreported. There are no European politicians with whom they truly identify, either to love or to loathe, and there are no issues that the outcome of the elections will determine with absolute certainty; decision-making power within the EU is simply too dispersed. Given that the object is to secure a consensus that reflects the range of opinions across 27 nations, this is rightly so, but exciting it is not.

WEAK LOYALTIES

Our task is to give people a reason to vote and to do so for the Liberal Democrats. This will not be easy: turnout in London and the metropolitan districts where no local elections will take place is likely to be very low indeed. Campaign planners need to recognise that the European elections are the nearest opportunity that people have to cast a vote on Britain's membership of the EU. The vote for parties is akin to a referendum question, and when the choice of answers is stark then Liberal Democrats have to sweep aside any caveats, take up the cudgels, and pitch for the 'Yes' vote. Traditional party loyalties are at their weakest in the European contest. In the past we have lost 'our' voters to other camps; it is time instead to win support from pro-Europeans across the party spectrum.

UKIP understands the rules of the game. In 2004 it had a simple anti-European message, it courted controversy, and it used the backing of media personalities to secure publicity. From an irrelevant 6% in the polls it rose to capture 16% just four weeks later. This needs emphasis: UKIP spent less nationally on election leaflets than the Liberal Democrats yet increased its vote by 10 points, while our best effort at grassroots campaigning increased our vote by just 1%. Once again UKIP now appears reduced to obscurity but no-one should imagine that the party will remain a busted flush. It was made to fight European elections, and anti-European personalities prepared to sign up to its flag and peddle its diet of myths and distortions are two-a-penny.

The lesson to be learnt is that the 2009 campaign will be London-centric and the 'air war' will matter vastly more than the ground war. Liberal Democrat local campaigning

strengths, based on letterbox by letterbox battles, will have minimal influence. Our first and absolute priority must be to attract media attention for messages that are clear, strong and controversial. Caution will invite political death.

There is no escaping the fact that the party leader will bear ultimate responsibility for the campaign. Nick Clegg has to make the key strategic decisions, ensure that messages are thoroughly researched, and communicate them personally and effectively. The voters neither know nor care about individual MEPs, and few members of the Liberal Democrat shadow cabinet are relevant to the issues that will be under debate, but the party leader is uniquely influential. In the contest of personalities, he is our man. Not for nothing do political chiefs in many countries put their own names at the top of their party lists, only to surrender their place in the European Parliament to the runners-up once the contest is over.

Next June, Nick will have the opportunity to establish himself in the minds of voters as a person of strength and vigour who has passionate convictions about the future direction of our country. The alternative risks him being regarded as irrelevant.

Nick Clegg is a passionate pro-European whose family and career have equipped him with greater knowledge of the EU than any other party leader. That awareness also extends to an understanding of its proper limitations and a contempt for its weakness and lunacies. No-one is better placed to argue the case for Britain to adopt a leading role in shaping the future of the European Union, strengthening it in some respects and forcing reform and retreat in others.

He will need to be bold if he is to be noticed. A pugnacious reaffirmation of party policy on European matters should be sufficient to arouse controversy! Some newspapers still regard it as appalling if a political leader makes the case for British membership of the EU; they consider it outrageous to suggest that the UK should aim to adopt the euro; and many still consider European cooperation on defence matters independent of the USA as some kind of betrayal of the 'special relationship'. The Liberal Democrat leader will need to set out targets for strengthening the EU's role in fighting climate change, he must insist that we fashion common policies on cross-border law enforcement, and he must call for development of Europe-wide immigration and asylum policies.

We shall need Nick to show his anger, for there is plenty about the EU that he should be angry about. Our leader should hit out at the failure of fishing policies that are leaving the oceans empty, at the nonsense of the European Parliament having two homes, and about the inability of many national governments to properly account for the EU money they spend. He should be outraged by arrangements that have made possible the abuse of expenses by too many MEPs. He should be passionate in calling for new arrangements to fight corruption across Europe and to protect fundamental liberties all too easily eroded by national governments. He should turn on the House of Commons for gold plating so many EU laws in ways that have created needless difficulties for Britain.

PARTY OF 'TRAITORS'

Proclaiming our own beliefs will alone not be sufficient. "Give them a fight!" was the motto of Whitaker and Baxter, the most successful professional election managers to emerge in the USA after the Second World War, and it is as true now as ever. Political fights attract public interest and their absence reinforces the dullness of the European campaign.

We should pick a fight with UKIP, a party of 'traitors' that seeks to undermine British interests and destroy our influence in the world. We share a common contempt for a divided Conservative Party that doesn't know how to balance its loathing for all things European with the practical realities of modern governance, but in other respects we are worlds apart. It's pro-Europeans versus anti-Europeans. We have different visions of the future. We think they are barmy; they think we have sold out. A bit of name-calling will do no harm. Concentrating our attacks on UKIP will provide voters with a clear contrast and enable us to secure the media attention needed to communicate our message. We shall be noticed instead of ignored.

Nick Clegg will face two specific problems. The first is the Lisbon Treaty which, zombie-like, will haunt the campaign and provide a target against which Conservatives can rally. The second is division over some European matters within our own party, on social policy for example. Nick has the opportunity to stamp his personal authority on this campaign. It will be rare for his personal views on European matters to diverge from official policy, and he is best placed to interpret any contradictions within it. Any criticism from Westminster colleagues should be dismissed: June 4 is an election to the European Parliament and none of the MPs have votes there. If the leader wishes to advocate that the only referendum he will support is one on Britain's membership of the EU, that would be consistent with the approach proposed here.

Within the party, horrified voices express opposition to promotion of our pro-European agenda. "Europe is unpopular and we risk losing the votes of some tactical voters in marginal seats," they say. But our opponents have plenty of ammunition they can use against us any time they choose. The disadvantages of fighting a tough pro-European campaign next June will be more than outweighed by the advantage of having our party leader established in the minds of voters as a man of strong principles. A week is a long time in politics and the issues will move on before the subsequent general election; a Conservative leadership with the prospect of government in its nostrils will want the divisive issue of Europe kept off the agenda. What people will remember is Nick Clegg, and whether he made the Liberal Democrats relevant or not.

Chris Davies is Liberal Democrat MEP for the North West of England

"We shall need Nick to show his anger"

READY, STEADY, THINK

Liberal Democrat policy making is so bad because the party thinks too big, says Richard Kemp

I was sitting in the train trying to answer a question and getting more despondent all the time. The question? “How do we continue to make such a pig’s ear of policy making?”

The question arose because I was contemplating how we could try to deal diplomatically and privately with the next debacle to hit in what passes for our policy making programme – the daft idea of directly elected police boards. This suggestion – like the suggestion about directly elected health boards, which we fudged at spring conference, is incapable of practical implementation. It has been condemned by every Lib Dem councillor I have discussed it with and every member of a police authority.

To be fair to the MPs, Labour councillors are equally scathing about the government’s proposals for elected crime and disorder partnership chairs and Tory councillors have been extremely vociferous about elected sheriffs. But I am not bothered about the other parties, I am concerned about why we botch things up.

There are two main faults. The first is that we just don’t know what policy is for. I have just contributed to a booklet about political leadership of councils and it seems to me that Lib Dem council groups pass through four phases, as do parliamentary parties.

Stage 1 has 1-3 councillors, who cannot hope to do anything much but can be excellent ward members and kick up a fuss so that everyone knows they are there.

Stage 2 is 8-10 councillors, who probably cannot get things through unless there is a hung council but can be a well informed and highly effective guerrilla force that can clearly enunciate key principles so that people empathise and sympathise with them.

At stage 3 there may be 18-20 councillors, who form the main opposition and are expected to be the next council leadership. They can get some things through council and they have to be ready for power. Stage 4 is being in power and having to deliver.

Our problem is that our party, especially our MPs, knows it is at stage 2 but acts as though it were at stage 3.

That’s why we produce such worthy but tedious booklets about policy which no-one reads. That’s why our spokespersons produce resolutions that try to fit the kitchen sink and all into 750 words. What we need now is not lots of policy but clear and consistent enunciation of principles so that people get a few ideas in their head about what makes us tick – about the sorts of things that we do if we got more power.

Why did we ditch the 10p extra on income tax? I know that, if I sit with a calculator and a cold compress, I can show that we will take more from the wealthy with our

new proposal, but I don’t have 15 minutes on every doorstep and I can’t write a monograph for Focus. Everyone understood what we wanted and most people – even those who would be adversely affected – agreed with the principle. Why are we now trying to make the same error without very clear and explicit policy on tuition fees, when it will affect our voters most?

The second major problem is that we produce the wrong stuff because the wrong people are left to produce it. I am sure that there is something in the water supply shared by Cowley Street and the Palace of Westminster that inhibits rational policy making

But it’s not their fault – it’s ours. There is very little in the way of policy motions that come to the federal policy and conference committees. Much of what does come is dire and worse than the stuff the MPs put in. I haven’t actually tried to get something on the conference agenda for about six years. I have always responded and often in a critical way. That, frankly, is true for most of us. Of course we have excuses we can make, but I am not going to moan again about a resolution unless I have been prepared to put something in myself or ensured that others have done so.

We discussed that at a recent Local Government Association group meeting. We will in future submit two or three simple resolutions at each conference and group together relevant council cabinet members or leaders to move items relevant to their portfolio.

And we will up the policy ante ourselves. At the Bournemouth conference, we launched a book on the practice of community politics, linking council decision-making to our campaigning grassroots principles. We will also launch a one-year programme of debate called ‘local council – local parliament’, culminating in a book in September 2009 setting out the argument for strong empowered local councils, which will obviate the need for single-issue elected boards.

Meanwhile, we must remember where we are. People are losing their feeling for what we are about. We are even being challenged on our traditional ground of community campaigning. If we can just get five clear ideas into people’s heads, we will be doing better, far better than skin-deep Dave or clapped out Gordon. Now that’s something worth going for.

Richard Kemp is a councillor in Liverpool and Leader of the Liberal Democrats in the Local Government Association

GRASS ROOTS RECORD

The Liberal Democrats are shedding their highest profile policies and should fill the gap with their record on local services, says Gerald Vernon-Jackson

We have all seen ideas come and go within manifesto papers, books of various colours and discussion documents. Some stick and most are just forgotten.

Well it's that time of parliament again, and somewhere in the depths of the leader's office some poor person is working on what our offer might be. Just as Father Christmas gets wish lists from children, so this poor person will be inundated with requests. So I thought I'd join the throng.

Few manifesto commitments make an impact. The only people who read them in detail are our political opponents and a few journalists. Neither of these groups are looking for the good, but just the few things in them to attack us on. We all remember the Tory attack on us over votes for prisoners.

The vast majority of people build their impression of us over many years and judge us on our well-known policies.

They will vote on our commitment to tax the very well off more. On 1p on income tax for education, on PR (or whatever it is called at the moment), on our pro-European stance, our opposition to the war in Iraq and our opposition to tuition fees.

But there is a problem with this. About half of these things are no longer party policy. We have ditched our commitment to tax the very rich. We have dropped our support for more funding for education, and now there are ill-thought out moves to drop our commitment to oppose top-up fees. The Iraq war is now less of an issue.

We seem to be in the process of dropping all our key policies that affect the day-to-day life of many people, and all we will have left is the policies of the 1987 and 1992 elections – PR and pro-Euro. We all know how well we did in those elections. No wonder many campaigners in the party are becoming worried.

I think there is a solution, and not surprisingly much of it should come from outside the Westminster bubble.

Two things will define us in many people's minds during the next election. Our leader, and what they know of us on the ground.

Nick's beliefs will be the things with which he is most at ease, the things that he will instinctively draw on. His simple core beliefs need to be at the heart of our manifesto, as he will be the one who is seen on TV screens. I am sure his belief in civil liberties, in fairness and freedom will shine through.

But the other way in which so many voters know us is through our local work. They know we care about their local area. They may think at times we can be a bit daft, but

they know our heart is in the right place and that we will campaign and support the things that are important to them and their families.

Each year we see new calls for localism, but for us there is a truth in it that neither of the other parties can provide. For Labour, localism has meant passing some power down to the regions. For the Tories, the market has always been king. We can champion the real localism that people want.

I am struck that our TV screens often have people protesting to defend their local schools, their post office, their fire station, their village shop and pub.

So should our theme be the defence of local services? Both Labour and Conservative see things so much in terms of cash that they lose the real issue, the defence of community. There must be a position where the Lib Dems guarantee that we will defend small schools, post offices, the police station, the fire station, the local shop and pub – all the things that make up a strong and vibrant community. Just preserving everything in aspic won't work but coming up with innovative ways of services sharing premises is working in some places. Post offices working out of the pub gives you two good things at once.

If we truly believe in the power of local people, then it should be possible for communities to decide that some part of their taxes could be used to support local services.

It could just be that we guarantee that these services remain, but that misses the point. This has got to be about empowering local people to have a real say on how they want some of their money spent. This takes power away from central decision makers and returns it to local people.

If that means that local schools, the post office, the pub and the church all want to tell people what they do and why they need supporting, so much the better. In some communities they will know all this, in others they will not and it will pull communities together. Giving people a real say in supporting their own communities and the things within could be way of getting people re-engaged with politics and voting.

Gerald Vernon-Jackson is Liberal Democrat leader of Portsmouth City Council

GOOD MONEY AFTER BAD

Tim Leunig was at the centre of a media storm when he was reported urging the population of northern towns to move south. He says he was actually calling for a massive devolution of regeneration spending

I was the lead author for Policy Exchange's recent controversial paper *Cities Unlimited*. It was launched, and immediately condemned by everyone. John Prescott declared that it was "the most insulting and ignorant policy I've ever heard". David Cameron said "I gather Tim Leunig's off to Australia. The sooner he gets on the ship the better." The Liberal Democrats issued a model press release to local parties in the north of England ("Tory think tank call an insult to [YOUR AREA]"). But they all criticised things that were not in the report.

The paper's findings are as follows. First that, despite huge regeneration efforts in the past ten years, poorer towns (not all in the north) have slipped further behind the national average and affluent towns (some of which are in the north).

Second, recent changes to the planning system have exacerbated housing cost differentials across Britain, unhelpfully reducing internal migration from areas with fewer economic prospects to places with better economic prospects below long-term averages.

Third, local regeneration has been hampered by the extent to which it is controlled by central government. The first means that we need to do things differently: it cannot be acceptable to see continually widening economic gaps between rich and poor areas. The second and third are what we need to change.

We therefore proposed that additional housing should be built in areas that people want to move to, as judged by land values. At the moment that is the London area, Oxford and Cambridge, although this may change over time. Docklands and Silicon Valley show for recent times, and Liverpool and Manchester a century ago, that when a town is (economically) in the right place at the right time it can grow dramatically and create thousands upon thousands of good jobs. That is good news for the people who get the jobs and, since it raises GDP, increases tax revenue and cuts benefit spending, it helps us all. The party's community land auctions (endorsed by the Tories as well) would be the best way to get support for the policy in places such as Oxford and Cambridge.

We also proposed to end almost every national regeneration funding stream in favour of local control. Over the years, we have had Regional Development Agencies, New Deal for Communities, derelict land grant,

urban development grant, urban regeneration grant (hands up anyone who can remember the difference between those two?), and so on.

If I listed them all, I would fill the article. With almost no exceptions, these would be wound down, and the money would be allocated to poorer councils in proportion to need. Need would be judged by average incomes, corrected for age (a 5-year-old with no income is not the same as a 35-year-old with no income), but little else. Councils would then be given the money as a block grant, and told to get on with it. They would not be accountable to central government; they would be accountable to local people.

Councils would then need to come up with a vision, and a means of implementing that vision. For some, such as Manchester, that vision is easy: it is clearly the hub city for north west England. But for others it is not so easy. There is a lot of evidence that coastal cities are disproportionately struggling. Ports are no longer as important, or as labour intensive, as they once were. Things move around Britain by road and rail, and ports are rarely on the main land routes to anywhere. There is also good evidence that smaller towns are struggling more than larger ones. Lancashire textile towns such as Burnley and Accrington have a tougher challenge than Manchester. And small coastal towns, such as Blackpool and Scarborough, face particularly tough challenges. There is no evidence that broadband based teleworking is effective at connecting remote communities, however much we may wish it were otherwise.

STAYING POOR

In some cases, we argued that local councils would have to accept that there was no realistic prospect that their town would be able to achieve national average levels of employment and wages. We looked in some detail at Sunderland and found that, despite huge regeneration spending and the arrival of Europe's most successful car plant, Sunderland remained poor. Indeed, a recent Joseph Rowntree Foundation report found that the majority of Sunderland's population was poor, and the number in poverty is growing. In such circumstances, the local council would have to think seriously about using the money to manage decline. As we wrote, "it is time to stop pretending that there is a bright future for Sunderland and ask ourselves instead what we need to do to offer people in

Sunderland better prospects". A sensible vision for the people of Sunderland almost certainly involves population decline.

We set out a number of policies that we thought local councils could consider. Since we believe in local control, we do not say that local councils should do any of the following, simply that they might want to think about doing some of the following.

One option is infrastructure. We argued that places like Hastings, close in distance but a long way in time from obviously successful economic locations, might well find it worthwhile to invest in better road and rail links to improve connectivity. In Hastings's case, better connections to Dover and Brighton seem a plausible candidate for regeneration spending. More generally, support for buses within towns would be an obvious idea.

The second option is supporting local employers, whether locally based or multinational. It should be for Sunderland, not central government, to decide whether to support Nissan (there are EU rules to stop Nissan playing one British city off against another).

The third option is to support local industry in general, by, for example, providing business parks. We showed how St Asaph, in north Wales, has done this to good effect.

Fourth, make a town or city attractive to people thinking about where to live. The classic example is to spend money on physical regeneration of the city centre. Vancouver has done this effectively, although the record in Britain is pretty mixed.

Fifth, councils could spend the money on people. They could spend it enhancing skills, or supporting job search programmes. These job search programmes could match local people to local jobs, but they could also be used to try to attract entrepreneurs, or to help local people find jobs elsewhere. If the majority of people in Sunderland are living in poverty, and there is a need for workers in Stevenage, would it really be wrong for Sunderland council to improve the lives of people in Sunderland by helping those who are prepared to move to Stevenage to find work there? We argue that there is no right or wrong answer to that question but that a local council, with a democratic mandate, should be allowed to do so if that is what local people want.

We also argue that local councils in areas with low skill rates could spend money attracting people with high skills. We already claim regional arts funding is part of regeneration, and it should be just as acceptable for local authorities to subsidise golf as it is to subsidise art if that is what they think will work best for their area.

FINEST EDUCATION

We also argued that it would be legitimate to spend the money on schools. This is valuable in and of itself, but it can also be a way of attracting people who care about education to a town. Rochdale, for example, could use its regeneration money to cut class sizes in half and double teachers' salaries, so that it offered the finest education money could buy, for free. That in turn could make Rochdale attractive to affluent young families thinking of moving out of central Manchester, perhaps to Sale or

“A sensible vision for the people of Sunderland almost certainly involves population decline”

Macclesfield. They would bring money with them, which in turn would enter the local community.

Fabulous education would not be the only possible selling point that a city could legitimately create.

Stoke-on-Trent has a great reputation for tree care, and it – or another city – could make

itself (literally) the greenest place in Britain.

And finally, we argued that councils should be able to use regeneration money to cut council tax (or any other tax under local control). They should be allowed to do so if they felt that would lead to regeneration, by making their town a more attractive place to live. But they should also be allowed to do so if they felt that no regeneration plan passed cost benefit analysis. If public spending is not worth undertaking, let us give the money back to people. We noted that the majority of people in Sunderland are poor. Are we really sure that using all of the regeneration money in Sunderland in traditional ways did more for the people of Sunderland than cutting council tax, which, as our party has said time and again, is a very regressive tax?

This is more plausible than it sounds. As part of our research, we discovered that the West End of Newcastle had had £60,000 per household in regeneration spending. In a radio phone-in, a local community leader said that she could see no effect at all. Perhaps more would have been achieved had the money been controlled locally. But I wonder whether it might have been better to have given each household £60,000 to allow them to find a better life elsewhere.

Local control has another advantage: policy diversity. That in turn leads to evidence as to what works. If Burnley and Blackburn make different choices, then local politicians and local people can look not only at their own performance but at that of their neighbours. Diversity creates the evidence for better policy making.

Finally, we called for greater accountability. We want local people to be able to hold local councils to account. That means a beefed up Audit Commission, with more responsibility to explain its findings to councils, councillors, the local press and local community groups. It also means more rights for individuals to scrutinize local decisions, ferret out weak performance and (sometimes) corruption. And it means greater ability to throw out poorly performing local councils. We need an end to one-party states. The paper “noted with approval” the introduction of STV for local elections in Scotland, which we stated might increase the accountability of councils to local people.

We called for local areas to make a genuine and honest assessment of their situation and potential; for local councils to have the freedom for make and implement policy, and to be subject to the discipline of real accountability to real people through the ballot box. Surely this a framework for regeneration Liberal Democrats should at least engage with?

Tim Leunig is a reader in economic history at the London School of Economics and a member of Kingston Liberal Democrats

THE PM WANTS IT!

There was controversy when Matthew Taylor agreed to review rural issues for the prime minister. It proved an instructive experience, he says

Having spent my whole working life as an MP outside government, it was an interesting moment to be asked over the fence to write an independent report for the prime minister. Furnished with civil servants and a remit to review 'Planning for Rural Economies and Affordable Housing', doors opened to allow me unparalleled access to both the government machinery of policy making and interested organisations from government agencies to pressure groups.

What there isn't, is a set blueprint for how to do this. I guess I expected a tightly controlled process – in fact, it was largely up to me to work through whatever means I wanted. I chose extensive consultation with community representatives from around the country. I was able to set the questions for a survey of a huge range of interested organisations and individuals, and hired a consultancy to undertake detailed analysis of the responses.

I wanted to visit every region, so government regional offices were detailed to organise visits to wherever and whoever I wished. I worked with many of the senior figures in key government agencies and other organisations. This kind of consultation, and processing the information gathered from it, would have been impossible without government support and funding behind me. But the fact that I was working at the request of the PM was the element that most opened doors. No one says 'no' when you are advising the prime minister!

ALL THE TALENTS

The politics of the request were obvious enough. New prime minister Gordon Brown wanted to be seen to lead a 'government of all the talents'. It was to be Tony Blair's 'big tent' re-invented, or at least patched up and back on tour. Having announced I would not be fighting the next election (following the birth of my baby sons), I was no longer a party spokesman, so I was an obvious Lib Dem for them to approach – especially as I had written the last Lib Dem general election manifesto. Nevertheless it was arguably a brave (or foolhardy) move for Gordon Brown to make. I had an entirely free remit to say what I think, access to government policy making, and the credibility of my work would reflect on the prime minister. In addition, I know there were those within Labour who felt personally snubbed by not being asked, and many more who disagreed with the politics.

The same could be said of the Lib Dems – in both respects. Some strongly felt I should have turned it down, while a few were clearly envious of the opportunity. But I was very clear that it was an opportunity not to be missed. Firstly, because it offered a real chance to influence directly a policy area fundamental to many Lib Dem

constituencies and constituents. My constituents are not – mostly – partisan, they want their MP to make a difference for them irrespective of party politics. To turn down that chance simply because the prime minister was not of my party would not have made sense to them or me. Secondly, being asked by the PM to work on such a politically important area enhanced the credibility of the party, especially here in the south west. Being out of government for so long is a political weakness that our opponents use to argue that Lib Dem MPs have no real effectiveness at Westminster – this exercise proved otherwise. And finally, to refuse this kind of cross-party working would have been to turn down the very approach to governing that Liberals advocate.

That said, in discussing the form of enquiry and the remit with ministers before it was agreed, I was clear this had to be solely my report, and I was clear the remit had to be broad enough to cover the key economic and housing issues facing rural communities without any 'no-go' areas. It was only once that was agreed that I said yes to it.

In particular, I insisted that the original suggestion from them that I looked at rural economies had to include affordable housing. Housing is at the top of Labour's agenda with good reason, and it is a particularly serious problem for most rural communities – a problem in large measure reflecting huge demand to live in the countryside interacting with a planning system designed to protect the countryside from development.

The result is not just a housing crisis – the wider impact undermines the viability of small rural communities and their economies. As a proportion of wages, houses in rural areas are now more unaffordable than those in urban areas. Wages in rural areas are well below the national average, something which is frequently disguised in statistics about rural incomes by the number of people who move to live in rural areas and commute to more highly paid jobs in the city. Meanwhile those who work locally, on local wages, are gradually priced out of their communities as they cannot afford the houses which are available.

If we are to have a living, working, truly sustainable countryside, we must ensure that those people who do the essential work of sustaining it can afford to live there. Today, people leave their community for want of housing, and as a consequence of this our small rural communities increasingly will become dormitories for retirees and commuters from the city.

The simple answer might be to build more houses. And that is part of the answer. But just as current planning practices are rendering many villages unsustainable through not allowing affordable homes for the people who actually work there, a development free-for-all would only

cut prices in attractive villages to affordable levels by rendering these villages unrecognisable – the coast of Cornwall and Devon becoming the UK’s very own Costa del Sol.

More development is indeed needed in our smaller rural communities and in our market towns. But this development must be sustainable, it must be to meet the needs reflected in a long-term vision for that community and, in particular in smaller rural communities, it must mean permanently affordable homes earmarked for local people.

PRICED OUT AND DYING

And to deliver this, we need not centrally decided ‘allocations’ but a bottom-up planning system that empowers villages and communities to lead these decisions. Planning proposals from above arouse hostility. But in most villages, there is now real concern that the people who do the work – on the farm, in the shops and schools and pubs, the trades people and the care workers – are all being priced out and the village is dying as a community. Empowered to take decisions and initiate affordable housing schemes locally, reassured that housing will be permanently affordable and for local people, a handful of pioneering authorities (many of them Lib Dem) is already helping this happen, and proving it works. It needs to stop being the exception and become the norm.

In many ways, the same can be said for rural business development. Instead of ruling out rural business growth and pushing it to edge of town business parks and concentrating economic development into cities, we need to make flexibility and appropriate scale and impact the watchwords, engaging with local communities to assess what is right for them.

Meanwhile our rural market towns face the opposite problem. Since villages mostly are protected from growth, while city dwellers want to move to the countryside, the inevitable pressure point is explosive growth of many market towns. On the one hand, our smaller rural communities, our villages and hamlets are being frozen in time as dogmatic application of planning guidelines prevents development in places not defined as ‘sustainable’ in terms of having a community centre and bus route – an application of the term ‘sustainable’ that makes communities ever more unsustainable. On the other hand, short-sighted year on year development in our market towns donuts them with unattractive, undesirable housing developments with no community facilities, shops or jobs.

It doesn’t have to be like this. The roots of planning can be traced back to the idea of garden cities and new towns – developments ‘planned’ so as to create functioning communities with all the facilities people need, and attractive places to be. Some worked better than others, and a lot has been learned, but recent best practice proves that the development of market towns can – when planned properly with a real long term vision – create new neighbourhoods and community extensions that work, not endless bland housing estates. But it needs a radically different approach to planning. Not just a red-line allowing

“To refuse this kind of cross party working would have been to turn down the very approach to governing that Liberals advocate”

new sequential development of housing estates to east or west, but a real partnership between the council and a long-term investor to master plan and enable the delivery of new communities that are attractive and working communities.

The Prince of Wales’s Poundbury development easily has its leg pulled, but it is worth a visit to see what can be done in terms of bringing together workspaces, environmental gains, shops and pubs, affordable as well as market housing in a functioning community, if the planning is done properly. Nor

does it need to be in this style or backed by royalty – a handful of other pioneering recent developments, as well as the more historic examples, prove it can be done anywhere. But it needs a will, and a way.

If we don’t want every market town ringed by unattractive and unsustainable housing estates, we need to change the planning system fundamentally, and we need to do it now. With long-term vision, we can make plans for shops and community centres in extensions to our market towns, and make them desirable and sustainable places to live.

Happily, party politics was not an issue when I was producing this report. Housing has gone into recession, but higher mortgage costs and bigger deposit requirements make the concerns about affordability even more pressing, whilst the pressure for rural development won’t go away. By the time the report was published, there was a growing coalition of support for these ideas. There can’t be many reports on planning and rural development welcomed by both the commercial Home Builders Federation and the Campaign for the Protection of Rural England.

Contrary to many assumptions, I was never leaned on by ministers or officials. On the contrary, I was able to deliver an honest set of proposals to radically reform planning practices related to affordable housing delivery, the rural economy, and the development of market towns – and to get strong support from ministers at the launch (though the detailed response from government to the near 50 proposals will come this autumn).

True, the real test of the value of this work will come with this detailed response and how it is acted on, but so far I have to say that by working closely with officials as well as the pressure groups and agencies, I think I have helped build a ‘willing coalition’ for action on all the main points. If so, there will be real change on the ground. And that, at the end of the day, is what I am a Liberal Democrat for.

Matthew Taylor is Liberal Democrat MP for Truro

SOFTER WORDS, ILLIBERAL DEEDS

The Tories have tried to pose as more liberal than they were in government. Don't be fooled, warns Dirk Hazell

I joined the Liberal Democrats in March, and have been asked to comment – as the Tories' immediate past chair of both their London Region and of their Foreign Affairs Forum – on whether their attempts to present themselves in a more liberal light are genuine. Are all the questions going to be that easy?

Becoming a Liberal Democrat has been an incalculable relief. Liberal Democrats' dedication to fairness, freedom, environmental sustainability and positive European engagement is certainly my comfort zone, but Cameron's Tories fail on each of these vital indicators.

On top of that, I believe decadence – not at all the same as liberal freedom – and sleaze are even more deeply engrained than in the Tories' naughty 90s.

I save precious space by doing no more than mention Cameron's notorious role as author of the manifesto in the crudest and most sadistic general election campaign of any major party in modern times. Building more roads was the essence of the Tory 'environmental' vision, and internal sources told me at the time that Cameron himself had excised more forward-looking environmental pledges.

By allowing his party to run a Poujadist campaign in 2005, Michael Howard opened Pandora's Box. However, he was perhaps more constrained by intellect, by the cultural constraints of his formative years, and by more courtly personal courtesy than is his successor.

Cameron seems to be trying to tell us he has got the hang of the 1960s. So we see a ham-fisted effort to get more diverse parliamentary candidates, to encourage more transparency about the sexual orientation of his representatives, and to apply more emotional intelligence to choice of words. That falls a long way short of liberalism.

ESSENTIALLY REACTIONARY

I believe the swing to Cameron was essentially reactionary, with Cameron presenting greater risks to freedom than did Thatcher. The Rothermere press is no friend of Liberal Democrats but, while their words would not be mine, their journalists like Peter Hitchens and, from a different angle, Peter Osborne seem to have sussed Cameron.

Indeed, I believe that while a Tory party led by David Davis would have looked stodgier, overall it might have been a less unreliable custodian of some core liberal values than one led by Cameron.

I see no evidence that a Cameron government with a working majority in the Commons would enhance liberal freedom, create fairer opportunities, accelerate environmental protection, or sustain long-term support for

services like education and the NHS. Core supporters would be very well rewarded, as in any tin pot dictatorship, but the disadvantaged and poor would fall even further behind and British society would become more hierarchical. Our political institutions would continue to wither on the vine.

On foreign policy, quite a good test of liberal instincts, Tories have defaulted to Poujadism to a much greater extent than Thatcher ever allowed.

Every Liberal Democrat knows that, in the 1950s, Tory lack of insight massively betrayed the national and wider interest by failing to assume the European leadership that was obviously Britain's for the taking and was also obviously compatible with the security relationship with the USA.

Half a century later, Tory lack of insight again betrays the national and wider interest.

Old school Tories in the European Parliament might have spluttered asides into their whisky about Johnny Foreigner's weird ways but at least they grasped that their duty was to sustain the national interest by working within the centre-right EPP-ED group in the European Parliament, so weakening extremes of left and right. I believe that, a generation ago, this helped to strengthen the new centre right in Spain: similar leadership is needed today in the challenging circumstances faced in much of central and eastern Europe.

Cameron demonstrated a breathtaking lack of judgment when, during his campaign for the leadership, he undertook to remove the Tories from the EPP-ED group. His first miscalculation was the need to make the promise; Howard and Francis Maude had virtually secured his election and Davis secured his own fate by giving the wrong speech to the party conference. Cameron's second miscalculation was the unnecessary risk he has taken with the national and, indeed, the European interest by destabilising the EPP-ED group with propaganda misrepresenting both the group's character and the Tories' status within it.

The powers of the European Parliament have greatly developed. British people at work, at home and in wider society need this parliament to be a successful force for fairness, freedom, sustainability and prosperity.

Petulant Tory destabilising of the centre-right in the parliament prejudices essential British interests. Tory MEPs have even been enjoined to decline office on the parliament's committees, a particularly significant insight into what passes for the Tory leadership's thought process given the strength of the traditional Tory instinct to fight from within.

Tory failure to sustain the centre-right in the European Parliament could help only the far right or the Marxist left. Like never before, Britain needs a really strong Liberal Democrat delegation to the Parliament in 2009.

Some 74 years ago, German civil servants had to swear to “be faithful and obedient to Adolf Hitler, Führer of the German Reich and people, to observe the law, and to conscientiously fulfil my official duties”. Today’s Tory euro-candidates must swear to “become a member of whichever political group in the European Parliament is decided on by the party leader”. Perhaps Cameron has good cause not to trust his own candidates, but do you think this suggests he is a regular “trust the people” or “set the people free” kind of guy?

I believe Cameron’s decisions and instincts are deeply illiberal: his regime tends to point in one direction while plotting another.

Staying with the example of foreign policy, Cameron flew to Tbilisi presumably to demonstrate democratic solidarity, a quasi-liberal media story like the Arctic huskies’ photo call. But Cameron’s real underlying policy of choice could not have been more different.

Indeed, the final straw for me with the Tories was a chance discovery of their sordid alliance with Putin’s United Russia in the parliamentary assembly of the Council of Europe, which is responsible for the European Convention on Human Rights.

Obviously, as Liberal Democrats, our duty is to work with fellow liberals in such a body, and the Tories’ duty is to work in partnership with established centre-right democrats. A really strong centre-right alliance could help to strengthen liberal freedoms for people across the council’s eastern member states.

ALLIANCE WITH PUTIN

But, in what may presage things to come after the 2009 European Parliament elections, the Tories chose to toe Putin’s line on issues like Kosovo. The Cameron-Putin alliance gave more force to Russian attacks on, for example, Georgia within the council.

While the UK has strong historic ties with Russia, how could any party with genuine claims to liberal values in any circumstances contemplate a human rights alliance with Mr ex-KGB Putin? Preference for an alliance with Putin over an alliance with Angela Merkel suffices to count as disqualification to be considered liberally oriented.

The Putin alliance is not the story Cameron wants voters to see – actually, there are lots of stories he is frantic that voters should not see – but it does show how illiberal key Tories have become.

This goes far deeper than the Tory leadership fantasising about the demotic, illiberal, and Poujadist webs they could weave in government were it not for the pesky convention.

It goes deeper than venal fantasising about the riches that could flow from being chums with Putin’s oil billionaires.

I think it points to a fundamental ideological difficulty the Tories have faced since Thatcher imported former Marxists, like Alfred Sherman, as advisers.

A really big problem with ‘former’ Marxists is that their resiling from Marxism too rarely takes the benign form of seeing the liberal light.

Having watched them over the years within the Tories, I believe they instead tend to continue to apply Marxist techniques such as, for example, atomising the voluntary party. This high priority for the Howard-Cameron regime

struck me as particularly remarkable in a context where, in London at least, the voluntary party tended to be a liberalising influence.

More significantly, perhaps, such ‘converts’ continue to apply Marxist principles: but on behalf of the haves rather than the have-nots.

Most Tories do not understand such matters: for many, being a Tory is a curiously apolitical phenomenon. Although during the quasi-adolescent counter-intuitive early phase of his leadership, he approvingly quoted Mao Zedong on television, I have no idea whether Cameron consciously recognises Marxist principle. What matters is that it permeates his regime.

Put another way, notwithstanding Cameron’s reference to the broken society, which Britain’s most powerful elected Tory promptly dismissed as piffle, Tory politics is critically based on seeing people mainly as economic actors, and is deeply embedded in the last century (although beware: their campaigning techniques are modern) and is the antithesis of liberalism. Recent events in Watford come as no surprise to me but I am delighted Liberal Democrats have been publicly vindicated.

A great many members of the Tory party are essentially decent if often unimaginative people but I know for certain fact that the mindset behind such delinquency – which is obviously incompatible with democratic politics – is not confined to Tories situated in Watford.

The old boys who ran the party, having fought the fight in the Second World War, would have had no truck with conduct they would have immediately associated with the Brownshirts. Knowing the current Tory regime as I do, it is no surprise that Edward Davey has written twice to Cameron about Watford without eliciting the sort of response that would have immediately flowed, without prompting, from the lips of – say – Heath, Whitelaw, Thatcher or Major.

To illustrate the illiberalism of Cameron’s Tories, I have concentrated on foreign policy. I could equally have focussed on the environment, where Cameron talked a bit green as part of his so-called brand decontamination exercise – hardly a substitute for genuine political realignment – but where Eric Pickles’s contradictory and more demotic utterances represent the Tories’ tabloid heart and what passes for being the Tory head.

I could have focussed on the economy: for all the cooing over the NHS, George Osborne clearly demonstrated last year how the Tories’ top redistributive priority was dead millionaires.

Under Cameron, the core political objective of the Tory leadership is to concentrate as much political power as it can in the hands of the smallest number of men (yes, I do mean men). The Tories have never more ruthlessly asserted the Führerprinzip.

Given a working majority in parliament, authoritarian means would lead to reactionary deeds. Cameron knew exactly what he was doing when he axed the Tory torch of freedom. We Liberals know who we are. Cameron is “not one of us”.

Dirk Hazell was chair of the Conservatives’ London Region and Foreign Affairs Forum until he joined the Liberal Democrats in March

OBITUARY: RUSSELL JOHNSTON

Michael Meadowcroft recalls the life of Russell Johnston, former Liberal Democrat MP for Inverness

Sometimes we talk about ‘natural’ Liberals, about those whose instinctive response to any political situation can be relied upon implicitly, whose judgement is invariably ‘sound’. Russell was one such Liberal. Perhaps more than anyone of his generation, even perhaps more than Jo Grimond if one takes into account the quality of passion and the attribute of emotion.

Whereas Jo inspired by the incisiveness of his analysis and the power of his peroration, Russell wooed with his warmth and by his blatant humanity. Also he had the ability to transform phrases that might otherwise be thought trite into vivid expressions of the liberal spirit. Who else would have dared to utter the following phrases, knowing that he could make them appeal directly to his audience?

“Liberalism can never be a spent force. Tomorrow or ever. As long as human kind retain their civilisation; as long as birds sing in unclouded skies, so long will endure the power of the compassionate spirit. But a Liberal society will be built only with the bricks of effort and the mortar of persistence. And it is to you that the challenge is made. It is upon you that responsibility rests. It is with you that hope resides.”

VIBRANT AND INSPIRING

On the cold paper the words seem hackneyed, but in the hall Russell made them vibrant and inspiring. Similarly he often ended his set Scottish conference speech with a verse from a poem which, almost mystically, he applied to the Liberal challenge. Reading the speech afterwards, there might seem to be only a tenuous connection, but it hardly mattered to those who ushered it into their consciousness in the hall. To them it was entirely apposite. No-one could make you feel quite like Russell could that it was necessary to continue the Liberal struggle, however lonely the climb and however rough and stony the path. Who could resist the peroration to his speech to the SLP Conference in 1971, just after the disastrous general election of 1970?

“We can shape the future of mankind, not just in Scotland, but on this planet. It is a future which could be bleak and Orwellian, but if opportunities are taken and people made aware, there is a future which glitters like rivers of molten gold. And it is your place to work towards this. It is your place if you believe in it, to give to it. And even if you and I never live to see its achievement, it is still worth working for. To be a Liberal and to know it is enough.”

Russell Johnston’s initial inspiration, he often said, came from the writings of Elliot Dodds, the Yorkshire Liberal who, with Ramsay Muir, was the author of the enduring prose of the 1936 preamble to the Liberal Party constitution. He was also much influenced by John Stuart Mill and, perhaps above all, by John Bannerman, whom he described as “a man of irrepressible, untidy kindness.”

Time after time in Russell Johnston’s speeches, there are references and acknowledgements to Bannerman, an iconic Scottish Liberal figure, who twice came tantalisingly close to winning parliamentary by-elections.

I often puzzled why Bannerman was such an inspiration to Russell until I realised that, in fact, neither of them was too concerned about detailed policy exposition over a range of topics, but both of them were able to draw from a deep well of Liberal intuition which could confidently be attached to the issues of the day. To both of them, Liberalism was an integral part of their personality and both of them returned time and again to the same few themes – electoral justice, the need to express the integrity of the Scottish identity, the linkage of personal responsibility with state guarantees and the internationalism of the Liberal cause.

Russell joined the Liberal party in 1954 – not an auspicious year – and, when he finally returned from national service in Berlin and completed his teaching degree, he became the parliamentary candidate for Inverness.

Russell held Inverness, in its various incarnations, for 33 years until he retired in 1997, whereupon he was elevated to the House of Lords. Along the way he achieved the unusual record of being elected with the lowest percentage vote ever: a mere 26% in 1992. Somewhat ironic for a lifelong advocate of electoral reform! Despite all his travels and the huge size of his constituency, he maintained a high reputation as an assiduous local MP and a powerful voice for the Highlands. In 1973 he was the first Liberal to be appointed to the European Parliament and, with the advent of direct elections, was expected to win the Highlands and Islands seat in 1979 but failed narrowly, and then less narrowly in 1984. The perhaps over-sophisticated reasons advanced for his defeats were, in 1979, that Russell refused to undertake to resign his Westminster seat, and then, perversely, in 1984, having given the undertaking, that the voters were determined to keep him at Westminster. Suffice to say that his passionate Europeanism was exercised thereafter through the Western European Union and the Council of Europe.

Whenever the Liberal Party arrived at the task of reorienting its philosophy in the light of new political

circumstances, it turned to Russell. He was a member of the ‘Liberals Look Ahead’ Commission (chaired by Donald Wade) in 1968/69 and a number of its phrases sound as if couched in his soft brogue: “Democracy cannot flourish on a diet of triviality” and: “Implicit in the report is a recognition of the human capacity for evil. History teaches... the futility of facile optimism.”

However, the report’s insistence that “Experience has shown that a Liberal Party is essential if Liberalism is to be effectively promoted and the Liberal influence in British politics maintained and strengthened...” sits uncomfortably with his later enthusiasm for the Alliance and particularly for the merger with the SDP, as does his waspish comment on Roy Jenkins’s Dimpleby lecture on 1980:

“Of course, I was pleased when [Roy Jenkins] made his Dimpleby Lecture a Liberal address. Of course, I’m in favour of co-operation, but I’m not selling the great Liberal tradition or betraying the years of toil of the faithful for a mish-mash of unsalted social democratic porridge. Liberals did not discard their beliefs for office.”

Or his comment the following year: “It is of the quintessence of Liberalism that we seek co-operation throughout society and want to work with others of like mind. But we are strangers to expediency. And we have our pride. We have not endured our long struggle in the hills to be patronised by the fat dwellers of the plains.”

The clue to his later advocacy of merger might lie in his contribution to the 1996 book *Why I am a Liberal Democrat*, in which he comments that: “Because of PR, most continental liberal parties were at some time or other in coalition government. The great, warm, patient Giovanni Malagodi [President of the Italian Liberal Party] taught me that compromise was no betrayal of principle... but a step or two on the march towards one’s goals.”

Russell’s end of conference speeches to the Scottish Liberal Party conference were legendary, so much so that they were collected and published in two volumes: 1971-78 and 1979-86.

Perhaps Russell’s forte was the speech rather than the article. Certainly he had a particularly niche at the annual Liberal Assembly, where he was regularly called upon to get the ‘establishment’ out of a difficult corner. Thus, in 1970, it was Russell who – unsuccessfully for once – put the case for the primacy of parliament against the advocates of the ‘dual approach’ of community politics, who in 1979 made the keynote speech in the philosophy debate, who in 1987 made the most powerful appeal for merger with the SDP, and who, at the 1988 special assembly, wound up the debate in favour of that merger with great effect.

Russell did not lack political courage. Unlike Jo Grimond, he had a much more robust view of the Scottish National Party and its latent illiberalism, and when Jo went off on one of his intellectual forays, hinting at the benefits of an electoral pact with the SNP, Russell, at the 1968 Liberal Assembly, criticised Jo, calling him an “intellectual dilettante,” which was tantamount to asserting that the Pope

wasn’t infallible. Similarly, after the 1970 election, Russell rejected David Steel’s vapid cross-party ‘radical action’ initiative, calling it “nonsense.”

TANTALISING QUESTION

The tantalising question in the light of his innate and passionate Liberalism, his oratorical skills, his breadth of experience and his popularity with party members, is why Russell never got even within reach of leading the Liberal Party. The closest he came was in 1976 after Jeremy Thorpe’s resignation, when he threw his hat in the ring but could not find any Liberal MP prepared to nominate him – apart from the quixotic suggestion of John Pardoe that he and David Steel should both nominate Russell despite being themselves candidates, a gesture rejected by Steel as a tactical ploy on Pardoe’s behalf.

Russell “thought that he might have won if he could have persuaded enough MPs to nominate him.” Maybe, or maybe not, but his view was never tested. Why not? The difficult answer lies in the uncomfortable realm of personal traits that those charged with the responsibility of recommending an individual for

high office have to consider. The question as to whether such concerns should influence one’s judgement is not capable of objective resolution and the debate will continue indefinitely. In Russell’s case, some of the facts are in the public domain. He was named, along with Gwyneth Dunwoody, as having the highest level of unpaid bills at the House of Commons dining room, and two obituarists referred delicately to his ‘separated’ and ‘estranged’ status in relation to his wife, Joan. Another Liberal colleague was appalled when a trustee of a renowned and sympathetic fund suggested to him, in response to the direct question as to why Russell had not been nominated in 1976, that the fund in question had sustained Russell financially for some time for the sake of the party.

I know very little more than this, but my personal experience of this warm and generous man makes me think that he was not harsh or callous but rather uncomprehending of some of the constraints that life places on us. He took pleasure in discussion and debate, and his enjoyment of conviviality caused him to be unaware of domestic and practical responsibilities to which he should have given attention. Alas, it was his undoing and the Liberal Party and politics generally are the worse for it.

Michael Meadowcroft was Liberal MP for Leeds West, 1983-87.

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“Whenever the Liberal party arrived at the task of reorienting its philosophy in the light of new political circumstances, it turned to Russell”

FOUL PLAY ON THE FAIRWAY

When a Liberal Democrat councillor voted down a multi-million pound planning application, it was his own side that turned against him, Gina Ford reports

“Will the Scottish Liberal Democrats do anything about the disgraceful events in the Aberdeenshire council group that followed a dispute about a planning application from American billionaire Donald Trump?”, *Liberator* asked in issue 326.

A good question, and just one of many raised by Donald Trump’s planning application for 500 houses for sale, 950 holiday apartments, a 450 bed hotel and two championship golf courses in Aberdeenshire.

Other questions include: Why did the Scottish business community and a majority of politicians appear to accept the applicant’s claims without question? How can the Scottish Government expect its policies on environment and sustainability to be taken seriously if pressure from some business people and regional media leads to the destruction of a protected site – particularly when the widely proclaimed economic benefits seem to be based on grounds less substantial than the famous shifting sands of the Menie sand dunes?

And closer to home – how could most of a group of Liberal Democrat councillors justify abstaining on a vote of confidence in a fellow Liberal Democrat who everyone accepted hadn’t done anything wrong? Sadly, the answer to the last one seems to be ‘so as not to upset their Conservative partners in the joint administration’ or even worse, ‘because they didn’t want to incur the wrath of the local paper’.

CELEBRITY ASSOCIATION

For those who are wondering why a planning application has caused this much fuss, here is a brief history. The association with a celebrity like Donald Trump had ensured acres of news coverage from the outset, especially as the application was for a development that proposed the destruction of part of a Site of Special Scientific Interest.

The application first hit the headlines in March 2006, when early reports indicated that the development could bring £150m to the local economy over the next decade, creating 400 jobs. By the time the application was eventually submitted and scheduled for consideration by Aberdeenshire Council, late in November 2007, the project had somehow become a ‘billion pound investment’ and the number of jobs more than 1,000. From the outset, the story was reported by an uncritical/supportive local press that seemed never to question whether the claimed benefits were realistic or deliverable.

In the months before the application came before councillors for consideration, there was a sustained campaign to present the proposal as a golf and leisure development (no mention of the huge housing scheme that is a key part of the package) that would be a ‘must have’ for the region and for Scotland. It was also apparent that Donald Trump wasn’t interested in compromise, since he was repeatedly reported saying that, if he didn’t get exactly what he asked for, he would abandon the project and build ‘the world’s greatest golf course’ elsewhere.

Making the story even more newsworthy, there were strong elements of *Local Hero* about the situation. Twenty-three acres in the middle of the Menie estate are owned by a local smallholder who lives near the beach (albeit in a house, not an upturned boat hull) and who has no desire to sell at any price. Despite the very obvious flaws in the resort proposals, the local press coverage suggested that any objections should simply be dismissed as naive or nimbyism or both.

It is only fair to say that the report submitted by the council’s planners was extremely comprehensive at almost 200 pages. It didn’t gloss over the many breaches of the council’s development plan, nor the objections on environmental grounds from Scottish Natural Heritage and the RSPB among others. However, what surprised those of us who’ve waded through a fair few planning reports over the years, was that it read throughout as if it were leading to the conclusion that the application should be refused. Turning the page and finding the recommendation for approval (on the grounds that the claimed economic benefits outweighed the breaches of the development plan and the serious damage to an SSSI) was just so unexpected that one would be forgiven for thinking that the wrong page had been stuck on at the end.

Aberdeenshire Council’s decentralised system of six area committees meant that the application went first to the Formartine Area Committee – which had the power of refusal or, as in this case, if it voted in favour of the application, to pass it on to the Infrastructure Services Committee. Both the area committee and ISC comprised members from the Lib Dem, SNP, Conservative and Independent groups on the council, with opinions divided for and against on all sides. The Formartine Area Committee voted 7:4 in favour of the application. Just nine days later, after around two and a half hours of intense debate, members of ISC voted to refuse the application. Only five members of the committee voted in favour of the application as submitted. In the subsequent vote to decide

between deferral to negotiate with the applicant to get the golf course removed from the SSSI and refusal, the committee split 7:7. This meant that the committee chairman, Liberal Democrat Martin Ford, was called upon to use his casting vote.

As Martin put it at the time, the committee dealt with the application in a perfectly normal manner. It was fully discussed. It had elements that were welcomed, and it had elements that were against sound planning policies, which the majority of the committee concluded meant it should not be granted as it stood. Refusal was an entirely reasonable decision in the circumstances and was taken in the full expectation that the applicant would adopt one of the courses that is generally followed in these situations – either an appeal or a new application with changes to address those aspects identified as problems by the committee.

Following the refusal, the applicant did not deal with the council in anything like a normal manner. Instead of re-submission or appeal, the council was given what was widely described as an ultimatum to grant the application as it stood within 30 days and immense pressure was applied to the council – and seven councillors in particular – that caused real difficulties for and within the council. The shocking news that ‘The Donald’ was not going to get his planning permission was reported around the world within a few hours of the decision being taken. The world’s press were also keen to stress the different lifestyle choices of the international billionaire tycoon and the local councillor who had the decisive vote, while the applicant’s representatives were quick to suggest that the refusal showed the world that “Scotland was not open for business”.

This suggestion caused what can only be described as a panic reaction, in response to which business people demanded Martin’s head on a plate and the local evening paper used digital wizardry to turn it into a turnip. The leader of the council, who might reasonably have been expected to support the perfectly legitimate decision of the appropriate committee of her council, chose instead to suggest that some way could be found to set aside agreed procedure and find a way to overturn the legally taken decision of ISC.

Within a few days, before the formal refusal notice had been issued by the council, the applicant’s representatives had a meeting with Scotland’s first minister Alex Salmond at the Aberdeen hotel they were using as a base. Within the same few days, the applicant’s representatives were also able to arrange to meet Scotland’s chief planner in his office. Salmond insisted that his involvement was in his role as constituency MSP, not in a ministerial capacity. Then, in what appears to be an unprecedented move, the Scottish government called in the application and announced a public inquiry would be held.

EXCEPTIONALLY POOR JUDGEMENT

These events were sufficiently unusual for a Holyrood committee to decide that it was necessary to investigate. Its subsequent report concluded that Salmond was “cavalier” in his handling of the plans for the Menie Estate. He was also accused of showing “exceptionally poor judgment” at best and “a worrying lack of awareness about the consequences of his actions”. Subsequently, in a statement that bodes ill for those who object to Mr

Trump’s plans, finance secretary John Swinney (who will have the final say on the matter) was reported as saying that opposition MSPs had “skewed the facts” in their report.

Unfortunately for Martin, the furore following the ISC decision prompted a motion of no confidence in him as chair of the committee. This was discussed at a special meeting of the council on 12 December, where the motion was passed by 26 votes to 10 with 29 abstentions. The abstainers included the Lib Dem leader of the council, the provost and 14 other Liberal Democrats.

“We appeared to have regressed several decades to a time when anyone taking ‘green’ issues seriously clearly could not be trusted”

The pressure to remove Martin came particularly from the business community. To my dismay, we appeared to have regressed several decades to a time when anyone taking ‘green’ issues seriously clearly could not be trusted because their environmental ‘prejudices’ would prevent them understanding the needs of business.

Martin was accused of green bias and condemned, although it was subsequently pointed out by the Holyrood committee that the decision of ISC was perfectly in order and justifiable on planning grounds. This makes the lack of support for him by Lib Dem colleagues even more shameful in the eyes of rather a large number of people, in Aberdeenshire and around the world.

We received many hundreds of phone calls, cards, letters and emails following Martin’s removal. Inevitably, some expressed delight at what had happened. Fortunately, the hostile communications were outnumbered many times over by supportive and encouraging messages. Once the public inquiry into the application got underway, in June, a further surge of messages in support of the position taken by Martin and his colleagues on ISC arrived. A common theme has been how rare it is in public life for someone to act with honesty and integrity. Respect for this position has also come from many people who admitted to actually being in favour of Trump’s plans. On the other hand, respect for and confidence in the council and its administration has taken a nose-dive.

As Liberator goes to press, we await Swinney’s decision. If he agrees to the destruction of a substantial part of the Menie SSSI, the world will soon know what value Scotland places on her priceless natural heritage.

Gina Ford is married to Martin Ford and is a former member of the Liberator Collective

WE'RE NOT ALL DOOMED

Dear Liberator,

In late July, the Guardian reported that, according to its opinion poll, "80% fear we are heading for recession". This is hardly surprising, since the media, including the broadsheets, have been creating hysteria on the subject for the past four months. What exactly is there for the vast majority of us to be worried about? At best we shall not get any richer for a couple of quarters, but just stay as rich as we already are. At worst we may get a tiny percentage poorer.

When we remember that we are as a society some four or five times richer in real terms than we were 60 years ago, either scenario is luxury indeed. The only people who have cause to worry about a recession are the minority in the most vulnerable industries, such as building, and those already living on benefits that maintain them only on the margins of decency.

We can well afford to compensate those made temporarily unemployed by generous unemployment allowances, and those incapacitated by generous benefits. Now that the Labour government has chosen to hound the poor, and David Cameron propagates the myth that "redistributing to the poor has reached 'the end of the road'" (a very convenient argument for those already rich), surely this is the time for the Liberal Democrats to declare our genuine commitment for a civilised society for which we are prepared to pay. After all, it is not too long ago that we had the courage to support the Greens' idea of a citizens' income.

LETTERS



Instead Nick Clegg tries to out-Tory the Tories by talking of tax cuts. I doubt very much if the electorate will see this as credible. Rather, it is time for the party to put its money where its mouth is and campaign for the necessary progressive taxes to finance a fairer and more just society in which "no-one will be enslaved by poverty."

Peter Wrigley
Birstall

DECLARE EXPENSES

Dear Liberator,

You make a convincing case in Commentary (Liberator 327) for suggesting that the Liberal Democrats ought to be able to be both right and popular in being identified with civil liberty.

Could I add another issue that, though not strictly libertarian, nevertheless connects with citizenship and openness, which is the matter of MPs' pay and allowances and how they deal with them and present them to the public?

I would suggest that this is an issue that periodically raises its ugly head and does indeed greatly annoy the electorate.

The last debate on this produced so much self-seeking and sheer

ignorance and stupidity, such as the MP who claimed that making a locksmith's bill public would be a serious breach of national security. The unanimous decision of Lib Dem MPs to adopt a stringent system of publicly available declarations of expenses is greatly to the party's credit.

In future elections, I would suggest that every parliamentary candidate should remind the electorate that his/her expenses will be a matter of public record and that the Lib Dems were the first and so far only party to adopt such a practice.

That should suffice, though of course if you are up against the likes of the Wintertons or a Labour candidate of the Michael Martin persuasion, one could make considerably more of it.

I think the public will respect us for adopting this position and will be prepared to accept that we intend to practise what we preach. Anything that might persuade the public to be a little less cynical about politicians is worth doing for the sake of the general health of the political system.

Mike Falchikov
Edinburgh

LIBERATOR 328

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Watching the Door
by Kevin Myers
Atlantic Books 2008
£14.99

In the early days of the Troubles, Kevin Myers was a bit of a Trot. Like many born in England of Catholic Irish ancestors, he has a rather romantic view of the nationalist cause but, finding himself on the ground as an RTE journalist in Belfast, rapidly became disillusioned with the sickness and stupidity of it all. He pulls no punches against either side but, since his closest experience was of the IRA, they form his blackest night. He is lucky to be still alive, very lucky.

His book, subtitled 'Cheating death in 1970s Belfast', is a chronicle of murder and mayhem against which Myers's morality progressively rebels, lightened only by the occasional shag. After a while, you wonder when it is all going to end (regrettably knowing not for a couple of decades after the end of this yarn).

"Murdering people for their religion was what Irish republicans had always done, especially in their most celebrated period 1919-22. Only the successful seizure of Irish historiography by republicans had concealed this vital truth."

Myers highlights Bloody Friday (21 July 1972), when the IRA attempted to blitz Belfast with 22 bombs in close order, killing nine and injuring hundreds, and the spiralling inhumanity that arose out of that. The same IRA lionises Bloody Sunday while failing to give account of itself.

Beyond this is the collective guilt of communities on all sides who condoned this violence, even participated in it (as in the occasional acts of groups of women or children against fallen soldiers). All of this weighs heavily on Myers's conscience, because he was of course part of it, whatever a 'journalist's code' might permit. In this sense, part of the rationale of the book is a confessional. Only the names of the guilty are changed.

Among the ills that the British ruling classes have heaped on Ireland over the years, neglect is one of the foremost. In the aftermath of the Liberal International Congress in



REVIEWS

Belfast in May, one of my colleagues toured the areas that feature in Myers's book and commented on how badly we have treated the Irish – she was speaking mostly about the poor quality of public housing and, having been a councillor in Chav City for many years, knew what she was talking about. The peace process (which has been really hard work for many unsung individuals) notwithstanding, there is clearly much more to be done if Ireland is not be treated to another civil war.

Paradoxically, having once been in with the unspeakable, the terrorists of either side, Myers now finds himself defending that other undefendable – the Roman Catholic Church in the Republic. At least the north was spared its excesses in what passed for education and social welfare in De Valera's Republic. Father Ted only scratched the surface!

Stewart Rayment

Roy Chubby Brown:
The Good, The Bad &
The Fat B*stard Live!
Universal DVD
2007 £19.99

Since you read *Liberator*, you are probably middle class and southern. You may therefore never have heard of stand-up comedian Roy 'Chubby' Brown and, even if you have, it is unlikely you have ever seen him perform.

Brown's real name is Royston Vasey, the source of the name for the fictional northern town in TV's black comedy *The League of Gentlemen*. Brown made occasional cameo appearances in the show as the town's foul-mouthed mayor. Otherwise you will not have seen him on TV, since his stage act is peppered with four-letter words and breaks every politically correct taboo in the book.

Instead, Brown makes a good living doing live shows and selling DVDs, of which this is the latest. The sleeve notes boast that he is "the crudest and rudest comedian on the circuit" and, judged by this outing, there is no reason to dispute this claim. The blatant misogyny, homophobia and racism will come as a shock to anyone who imagines this sort of humour was killed off in the 1980s by alternative comedy. But it would be a mistake to write off Chubby Brown as a throwback to the northern working men's clubs or end-of-the-pier shows.

Brown may have begun his career in the clubs in the 1960s but his act is of our times. This DVD records a live performance on his home turf in Teesside. The audience is exclusively white and working class. It is also predominantly under 30, people who weren't even born in the heyday of ITV's *The Comedians*.

Brown's comedy taps into the feelings of an audience whose traditional economy has been dismantled, which resents asylum seekers, cannot understand the new progressive consensus and believes that a southern liberal establishment is hiding 'the truth'. Indeed, Brown is a hero to this audience because he says things they've been told they can't say. You could easily dismiss Brown's audience as the BNP vote out on the piss. And their prejudices are ultimately self-defeating, since they repel the sort of creative people who might otherwise help bring an economic revival, who prefer instead to settle in towns that are more diverse, cosmopolitan and tolerant.

Nevertheless, watching this show unexpectedly provides an insight into another world and the strong feeling that many white working class people have of being unfairly marginalised. Yes, this is your country and you don't know the half of it.

Simon Titley

Monday

At last the journalists are leaving me in peace after my deportation from China over my part in a demonstration in favour of Tibetan independence. I have to confess that the account of events which has gained currency is not strictly correct. I yield to no one in my admiration of the Dalai Lama – among his many other good qualities, he is as jolly a fellow as ever danced on a table in the Bonkers' Arms – but the placard which I was carrying when the local rozzers apprehended me did not say "Free Tibet" but "Free to Bet": I was hoping to encourage the worthy Chinamen to wager on the outcome of such events as the rhythmic gymnastics and the Greco-Roman wrestling. Unfortunately, the authorities took a dim view of this and I was on a seaplane home before my feet had touched the ground. Despite this, I retain my admiration of Chinese culture – and of Chinese food in particular. When I mentioned this to the arresting officer, he asked what my favourite dish was. "Number twenty-six," I replied.

Tuesday

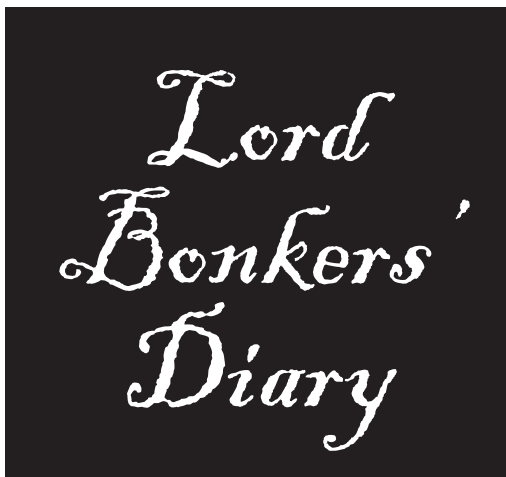
I awaken to the alarming news that a peer has caught fire at Weston-super-Mare. I have to make several telephone calls, including one to the Somerset Fire Brigade, until my mind is set at rest and I am satisfied that the story does not concern my old friend Brian Cotter. (He is now a member of the Lords, having sat for the aforementioned resort between 1997 and 2005. He lost the seat despite my last-minute poster campaign under the slogan "Don't be a Rotter, Vote for Cotter"). Coincidentally, I am told that there has been a small conflagration involving another Weston peer: Jeffrey Archer (it seems that only his underpants were involved). To celebrate Brian Cotter's deliverance, I take a party of especially Well-Behaved Orphans to the pier on Rutland Water for candyfloss. Its superstructure has never been quite the same since it was dynamited in 1939 to prevent German troops landing, but it still has much to offer the agile holidaymaker.

Wednesday

To Holyrood to congratulate Tavish Scott upon his election as leader of the Scottish Liberal Democrats. There is something of an Apostolic succession to his assumption of this eminent position: Scott used to work for Jim Wallace, who, in turn, began his political career carrying Laura Grimond's shopping; and Laura, you will recall, was the wife of Jo Grimond, whom some historians believe to have been present when Joseph of Arimathea landed at Budleigh Salterton, bringing with him the tenets of Liberalism on tablets of stone. When one adds to this weighty heritage the Scots' predilection for politicians with either two surnames or two Christian names – one thinks of Menzies Campbell, Russell Johnston and Nicol Stephen – then, despite the obvious appeal of someone called Ross Finnie, his victory was assured. Incidentally, when I arrive at the Scottish Parliament, I am asked if I know Mike Rumbles. "Yes," I reply, "I am afraid he does."

Thursday

Dinner with Paris Stilton, the Leicestershire cheese heiress.



Friday

My unfortunate experiences in Peking notwithstanding, I have to admit that the Olympics were great fun. The important thing now is to continue to interest our young people in all these new events we have discovered. With this in mind, I have agreed to act as a consultant to the British Yngling Board. You must know yngling: it's the sport that is sweeping the nation. I would go so far as to say that, at a party, if you wish to mingle, a good opening gambit is "Do you yngle?" I intend to build upon this with a poster campaign; I envisage a picture

of a worried man with the caption "Still single? Yngle!" and another showing a sporty young lady captioned "I tingle when I yngle". Add to this a new snack named Pryngles, an event at Dungeness under the title "Yngle by the Shingle" and an episode of Emmerdale in which the Dingles yngle, and I think you will agree that I am more than earning my corn.

Saturday

In these days of Bakelite and the electric cinematograph, it is important for political leaders to appeal to the younger voter. As Cowley Street was rather undermanned over the holiday season, I naturally offered to lend a hand with the drafting of Nick Clegg's press releases. So when it transpired that a company called PA Consulting had lost an electronic-type computing memory stick (I am told that is the correct term), which contained personal details of all 84,000 prisoners in England and Wales (it must have been a very long stick), I naturally sprang into action and drafted the following in our Leader's name: "Charlie Chaplin could do a better job running the Home Office than this Labour Government." As you can imagine, I was feeling tolerably pleased with myself, so it was no little shock when I was informed that Clegg thought this "old-fashioned". Ever a team player, I swallowed my pride and produced something more à la mode for him the following day: "Frankly the Keystone Cops would do a better job running the Home Office and keeping our data safe than this government." I also suggested he say that "Jacqui Smith as Home Secretary is as lost as Mollie Sugden in 'Come Back Mrs Noah'," but that was not thought suitable. Really, how much more up to date can one get?

Sunday

I have decided to dabble in popular music once again (my part in the phenomenon that was Rutbeat in the 1960s has yet to be fully chronicled) and am on the lookout for new talent to add to my stable of artistes. When I say "stable," I mean it literally, as that is where the recording studio is located. This morning I audition a charming pair of twins who go under the name of "The Impertinent Girls": they are not very good singers, but I gather that is no longer regarded as an impediment to a career "in the business" – much as one need no longer believe in God to be a Church of England minister. Their rendering of a song encouraging the listener to touch a certain part of their anatomy is regarded as a certain "hit" by all who hear it. My only worry now is keeping them away from poor Lembit.

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