

liberator



🔥 Lost in a coalition forest – Tony Greaves

🔥 The fight of our lives – Andrew Duff

🔥 No Tory scorched earth – Richard Kemp

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Liberator is printed by Lithosphere
Studio 1, 146 Seven Sisters Road, LONDON N7 7PL

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☛ was founded in 1970 and is produced by a voluntary editorial collective

☛ acts as a forum for debate among radical liberals in all parties and none

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Cover Picture - Paddy Molloy

COMMENTARY

MUST TRY HARDER

Liberal Democrats wondering why their poll ratings took a nosedive over the summer would do well to read an article by Tory commentator Ian Birrell in the Financial Times (24 August). It reported that, amongst leading Tories, “there is surprise that the Lib Dems are not pushing harder in areas where there is room for manoeuvre within the coalition agreement.”

The article revealed that “one senior Tory said he was amazed at how little the Lib Dems fought their corner in meetings, thereby failing to offer sufficient counterweight to the right. He was disappointed by their caution.”

Birrell contrasted this Lib Dem weakness with the pragmatism of the Tories, who had adapted well to the new political landscape.

He advised Nick Clegg “to worry less about the role of deputy prime minister and more about finding issues that he and his party can proclaim as their own” and warned: “If he fails to carve out his own distinct territory, we will be left with a curious conundrum: the party that has long advocated a new political order will emerge as the least adept at adapting to the intriguing new world of coalition politics.”

In the coalition negotiations, the Liberal Democrats focused on policy. As a result, the coalition agreement contained many Lib Dem policies. But the party made the mistake of confusing legislation with government. Reform does not necessarily require acts of parliament, consequently the Tories can achieve much of what they want without new legislation or parliamentary votes and therefore without reference to the coalition agreement.

The party also failed to focus sufficiently on the allocation of government jobs. Five government departments have no Lib Dem minister. Meanwhile in the Lords, apart from whips, only two Lib Dem peers (Tom McNally and Jim Wallace) hold any sort of ministerial post. The party was also short-changed when it came to political staff appointments.

Coalition is a continuous job of negotiation but the Liberal Democrats seem to think the negotiations ended with the agreement. Lib Dem ministers appear too keen to emphasise their loyalty to the coalition and not keen enough to fight their corner.

There is no point joining a coalition unless the benefits outweigh the disadvantages. If the Lib Dems remain inhibited about carving out a distinct position, low poll ratings will turn into bad election results and ultimately political oblivion.

YOU’VE BEEN FRAMED

This September’s Liberal Democrat conference is likely to be awash with journalists asking the same basic question, “Coalition. For or against?”

The media love a simple ‘either/or’ narrative. It makes their life easy. But it is a frame of reference that rarely does justice to political questions, to which the answers are invariably complex or nuanced.

And it can be a damaging frame of reference, as media coverage of the climate change debate demonstrates. The media need two sides to every question so the opinions of climate change sceptics are given equal weight, despite the weight of scientific evidence being heavily against them. The media’s portrayal of the issue thus becomes a travesty.

The Liberal Democrats will experience equally misleading media coverage at their conference. Until May, the Lib Dems were perceived as marginal to Westminster politics so not many journalists came to their conferences and those who did rarely bothered to learn about the party. For evidence of this ignorance, consider the media’s tendentious division of the party into “modernisers” and “beards and sandals”. Note also the media’s habit of interviewing such irrelevant figures as Mark Littlewood and Ben Ramm.

The coalition means there will be many more journalists at conference but their knowledge and understanding of the party will be even worse. Lib Dem delegates should not be surprised to be regularly accosted by hapless young reporters asking, “I’m looking for someone who is for/against the coalition.”

Such media will have a tough search on their hands. Most party members regard the coalition as a mixed bag. They understand the logic behind the formation of the coalition, are pleased with the achievements in the negotiations but are unhappy about some of the concessions made to the Tories and apprehensive about the effects of cuts in public spending. And these views will evolve depending on future successes and failures.

But this level of sophistication won’t fit the script. So the media will search the corridors and bars and eventually they will find a very few delegates who either uncritically support everything the coalition does or opposed the coalition from the start. And armed with one of each, they will set up a ‘debate’ between them as a means of framing the issues.

The ‘either/or’ frame makes for good television but rubbish journalism. It fails to report accurately or explain what the debate is about. It serves the interests of no-one in the party. If a journalist tries to frame your views in these terms, a short message about sex and travel is advised.

RADICAL BULLETIN

JOBLESS, BROKE, FORGOTTEN

Those three words are not prospects normally highlighted by the Liberal Democrats when seeking people to stand for parliament. But ever since the general election, there has been a grumbling undercurrent, actually not very far under, about the performance of the Cowley Street campaigns department.

Some of this is no doubt motivated by those who thought they would win but didn't, and are looking for someone else to blame. But quite a lot isn't and, in particular, dissatisfaction has surfaced among candidates about how they were treated.

A dinner on 23 July for defeated candidates in target seats led to a note being sent to chief executive Chris Fox (or "our all listening and responsive chief executive," as the dinner's convenor Ed Fordham described him), which has fallen into Liberator's hands.

It read: "Candidates don't feature in the Campaigns and Elections Department in any way other than negatively. Often the notion of the candidate is used negatively and considering how new and often recent[ly] our organisers have been recruited within campaigns the low standing attached to candidates is too clearly achieved through negative attitude and stereotyping jokes. It's probably well past time that this attitude ended – especially when it emanates from Federal staff."

This concern that Cowley Street knew too little about individual seats but still decided their fate was reflected in the comment of one former MP: "I resent being told by a department of people who haven't knocked on a door outside a by-election team what to do."

This theme surfaced elsewhere in Fordham's note: "More and more surveys are used for data and not actually to inform our thinking. Several candidates spoke of hassle from their organiser/staff when they wanted to see survey replies and to personally respond."

The note also criticises the online campaign for being "solid, but not progressive. Nor was it adventurous or in any way viral and the local routes into this were nil".

It ended by observing: "Candidates, not unsurprisingly, have a lonely role but that is not widely realised or recognised by those who might have a role in supporting them. Several people spoke of not having heard from their campaigns officer, from the candidates office etc. etc. Candidates who didn't win find themselves without work, in debt and given the impression of having been forgotten."

Beyond candidates' feeling of individual grievance, the meeting and subsequent correspondence threw up familiar issues about female and ethnic minority

candidates.

"I had initially said that I would mentor women candidates, but now feel that unless the party stops treating women as makeweights, and indeed stops treating all candidates as unworldly idealists, my motivation is reduced," a former MP said.

The letter to Fox said: "BME campaigning and amongst new and growing communities is a particular weakness in the party, is known to be and yet the [campaigns] department seems very weak at being able to address this. Many candidates have specialist knowledge and would be willing to share this wider."

But the correspondence between candidates also dwelt on some less familiar forms of under-representation, which this group of candidates at least recognises need to be tackled. One noted: "We also have very few genuinely working class candidates, either male or female or BME. The party has no real connections to the trade union movement alas and I see that Vince Cable's invitation to TUC has been withdrawn."

Another raised class: "We also need to recognise that gender is only one of the factors on which we are failing massively. Ethnicity has been widely discussed (though little has been done about it), but more generally, how many of our MPs get elected while having a young family? Very few, and that is a problem for both women and men.

"We don't even do very well on drawing from the 93% of the population who have attended state schools, and that means that many (possibly most) of our MPs are drawn from a very narrow and wealthy section of the population. Our parliamentary party is disproportionately comprised of privately educated wealthy white men and we need to look at whether that is really what we want."

The latter observations came from a candidate who is middle-aged, male and white, though whether wealthy or not we don't know.

The candidates' correspondence also throws intriguing light on the jostling for peerages. The Gender Balance Taskforce made enquires about the dissolution honours list and was told it had been decided last autumn and therefore Sandra Gidley and Susan Kramer were unavoidably excluded as no-one knew whether they would be MPs after the election.

BUM SHORTAGE HITS PARTY

When the coalition deal was done, there was an understandable emphasis on policy, since both parties wanted to know what they were signing up to.

The agreement also contained methods by which disputes would be resolved, but it did not deal with the vexed issue of 'bums on seats'.

This was possibly understandable in the frenzied

atmosphere, but the consequences are becoming clear, and not to the Lib Dems' advantage.

A cursory reading of the Reports to Conference documents will reveal the 'thank you and goodbyes' given to a large number of staff whom the party had to make redundant when it lost the Short and Cranborne monies used to fund opposition party parliamentary machines.

In their place, the party does have a number of special advisers of various kinds paid for from government funds, but in nothing like the proportion of government places held by the coalition parties.

One MP told *Liberator* that the Tories originally agreed in principle to the formula used in Scotland, where money is paid to junior coalition partners in proportion to the places that they take up in government. This was left to chief executive Chris Fox to sort out in detail but, before he could do so, two factors derailed the Lib Dems' efforts.

It dawned on the Tories that they were making more than 70 staff redundant through their loss of Short and Cranborne monies, and they started asking themselves why the Lib Dems should be treated differently. There then came a media assault on the cost of political advisers, which led to all concerned getting cold feet.

The matter went to David Cameron and Nick Clegg, who decide that the Lib Dems would get access to all the machinery of government. But the machine was by that stage already stuffed with Tories and only the Lib Dem cabinet members got direct political support.

One MP commented: "We paid far too little attention to bums on seats. The Tories shrewdly saw that over five years this was the key. We seemed to forget all about the Lords dimension, and should have secured political staff appointments right across all government departments."

SITUATION VACANT

Faced with the appalling prospect of Lembit Öpik as Lib Dem candidate for mayor of London, the regional party has hurriedly begun to look around for alternatives to meet its self-imposed autumn deadline.

But who? Allowing an 18-month run-in to the election would be entirely sensible were the post to be contested seriously but, since the party barely exists in some London boroughs and the whole contest is likely to be a Johnson vs. Livingstone grudge match, it is hard to see a Lib Dem campaign being effectively sustained over that period (*Liberator* 340).

Previous candidates Susan Kramer and Brian Paddick are thought unlikely to wish to put themselves through the experience again. The third previous entrant, Simon Hughes, is now deputy leader. Of the other London MPs, all except Tom Brake are ministers.

Brake would be a credible candidate but he is middle aged, male and white – attributes not readily changed – and there is pressure for a candidate who is female and/or from an ethnic minority.

Pressure has thus descended on one of the Lib Dems' newest peers, former Play School presenter Floella Benjamin. She is even understood to have been invited to meet Nick Clegg to be 'persuaded'.

But friends of Benjamin say she is well aware that she is a novice at formal politics and is, to her credit, reluctant to stand for such a publicly exposed role

where this inexperience might become apparent.

This doesn't leave any very obvious alternatives except possibly London Assembly member Caroline Pidgeon.

Öpik meanwhile seems to have a portfolio career. Following his foray into stand-up comedy (*Liberator* 339), he is now working for Press TV, a station funded by the Iranian regime. Further comment is superfluous.

NUMBERS GAME

Those who delve deeply enough into the Reports to Conference will find the news that the Federal Executive "noted the large increase in membership during the election, which continued after the Coalition announced (at a rate of ten new members for one resigning)."

A little further on, the Federal Finance and Administration Committee allowed itself a moment of self-congratulation, saying: "During the second quarter of 2010, net membership growth was over 10%, compared with 1.6% in the period covering the 2005 General Election.

"There was also a large increase in the wider community of active Liberal Democrat supporters with an additional 20,000 joining the e-supporters list and the Party's Facebook supporters page growing to 90,000 followers."

Yes, but 10% of what? 'E' and Facebook supporters are not necessarily members anyway and, devoid of a membership figure, the percentage rise is meaningless.

Ten pages later, some more figures appear. These say that, as at 31 December 2009, there were 58,768 members of the party, against 59,810 at the same point in 2008, which is, er, 1,042 fewer.

Let's take the December 2009 figure as the only published base. A 10% increase would give 64,644 members.

When the Clegg versus Huhne leadership election took place in December 2007, the party declared that the 41,465 votes cast constituted a 64% turnout, giving a total membership of 64,727 (*Liberator* 323).

Thus membership has been near enough static for two and half years, having declined by 83.

By contrast, the 2006 leadership election saw 72,064 ballot papers distributed, and the 1999 contest 82,827. At the time of the merger 22 years ago, the party was thought to have over 100,000 members. Still some way to go then.

PEOPLE'S FRONT OF JUDEA

When the Social Democratic Party was last heard of, it boasted a logo depicting an elephant with a knot in its trunk and it existed only in Bridlington and Neath (*Liberator* 322).

The mould breakers have now acquired a new outpost amid the colourful confusion that is the independent groups on Richmondshire District Council.

What was the Richmondshire Independent Group has morphed into a four-strong group called North Yorkshire's Independent Social Democrats.

This is of course entirely different from the Independents of North Yorkshire and the Richmondshire Alliance of Independent Councillors, both of which are also represented.

WHICH TWIN IS THE TORY?

The coalition was formed too fast and it's now becoming clear that Liberal Democrats are expected to promote Tory policies that the party opposes. Disaster beckons, says Tony Greaves

I was driving to the count in Pendle on 6 May when I heard the exit poll. A cold shiver ran down my spine. "February 1974 all over again" and so it proved. In 1974, we could feel the slide in the last week. This time, even the last opinion polls gave us around 28%.

It's now widely recognised that the main failure of the campaign lay with the rigidity of the national organisation once the first leaders' debate so radically changed the terms of the contest. I am told the people running our campaign were more used to selling soap and motor cars. What is clear is that there was no competent political oversight of the kind that might have come from the likes of a Geoff Tordoff, Des Wilson or Richard Holme (or indeed Chris Rennard), with their understanding of the fluidity that successful political campaigns often demand.

There appears to have been neither the ability nor willingness to consider radical changes to strategy when everything changed. They even repeated that dreadful election broadcast with all the litter, possibly the worst since Rosie Barnes's rabbit. By polling day, the slogans and the messages were stale and counterproductive.

The problems all arose from the pre-ordained refusal to talk about hung parliaments, even when they became the big election issue. Suddenly we had the opportunity of a lifetime to set out Liberal Democrat policies, the things that we would put on the table for an agreement. Day after day, we could have led the agenda with our priorities. Instead, by our stupid refusal to discuss the matter, we allowed the Tory press to selectively define and distort our policies on Tory (and New Labour) terms. We became the party of illegal immigration, letting out all the prisoners tomorrow and joining the euro next week.

And we allowed them to put the fear of God into two million intending Liberal Democrat voters over the 'threat' of a hung parliament. No wonder they all shuttered away in the last day, many changing their mind in the polling booth itself, judging by the number of crossed out LD votes reported by our counting agents. The irony is that all these scaredy-cats got a hung parliament anyway.

But the party was in no position to explain to people what we would do in a balanced parliament. We had not thought it through. How else to explain the ad hoc way the decision to go into coalition was made, and the way that the structures of the coalition are having to be made up as we go along?

FOOLISH EMPHASIS

The initial policy agreement on 1 May was a triumph for the Liberal Democrat negotiators – Alexander, Stunell, Laws and Huhne – apart from the foolish overriding emphasis on the deficit reduction. The

longer document *The Coalition: our programme for government* that came some days later on 20 May saw the Tories recover some ground, but it's still a good agreement.

It's been the operation of the coalition in practice where the detail – and the devil – have come into play. What has shocked so many people are the high-profile announcements of right-wing initiatives by Tory ministers that cannot be found in the coalition agreements – the Academies Bill rushed through in a quite disgraceful manner, the proposals to tear up and recast the way the NHS is run, cuts in local authority funding that deliberately target the poorest areas... allied to an astonishing degree of incompetence in the way they have been announced.

Then we have the extraordinary situation in which Liberal Democrat ministers are going on TV and even writing articles and supporting lines that are pure Tory policy, contradict Liberal Democrat policy and which, one assumes, the party as a whole still totally opposes. This is crazy. But they get detailed briefings from the civil servants and they have all had instructions telling them that this is what they have to do. Why does no-one just say "no"?

The concentration on the detail in the policy agreements masked two basic things about the way that government works in this country. The first is that secretaries of state have an enormous leeway in the policies in their departments – to a degree this has been forgotten as a result of the New Labour years, when announcements all had to be filtered through 10 Downing Street. The second is that government is a matter of day-by-day, week-by-week and month-by-month reaction to events, and policy 'launches', and in this environment a pushy minister can create his own agenda.

Little or none of this had been thought about when the programme for five years was triumphantly revealed. I think I was the only person at those late night meetings of the parliamentary parties to point out that it was no such thing. But no-one wanted to know then and, to be fair, there was no time to think about it. One senior colleague in the Lords says that many of the problems come from making an agreement in four days that should have taken four weeks, and he is right.

SERIOUS MISTAKE

Having a Liberal Democrat Chief Secretary to the Treasury was a serious mistake, which will lumber us with too much primary responsibility for disastrous and highly unpopular cuts. It might have worked with David Laws; it's now a huge millstone. I also think we should have stuck out for one of the big high-profile service departments. But that's all past history.

On the week-by-week working of the coalition, there is another document called *Coalition Agreement for Stability and Reform* (you can easily find it on Google), which sets out in three pages “how we expect our Coalition Agreement to operate in practice”. It says: “There is no constitutional difference between a Coalition Government and a single party Government, but working practices need to adapt.” I assume this was written by civil servants anxious not to rock the boat, but it is wrong. There should be a difference, and the changes to “working practices” need to go much further than set out in this paper, which mainly covers the relationship between Cameron and Clegg.

What systems are there inside the coalition to give Liberal Democrats influence (not to mention a veto over some of the worst right-wing nonsenses)? I am tempted to give the answer “Who knows?” Whatever they are, they are not working in our favour. Apart from the Clegg-Cameron relations, the main innovation is the creation of the Coalition Committee to “oversee the operation of the Coalition”. It will deal with “unresolved issues” from within the government. What effect it has had in practice is unknown since its proceedings are not in the public domain and are not, as far as I am aware, reported anywhere in the party.

Within departments (or those with Liberal Democrat ministers – there are some without including DEFRA, DCMS and Northern Ireland), Liberal Democrat influence depends on our ministers, and practice seems to differ from department to department. Of those I have seen at close quarters, Sarah Teather is working closely with Michael Gove (too closely? – but watch out for the pupil premium), and Andrew Stunell seems to be gaining respect and influence at Communities and Local Government – how far he can tame the dreadful Eric Pickles is an interesting question!

But the real problem is the injunction: “decisions of the Cabinet to be binding on and supported by all ministers”. That’s okay looked at from within the government, but it’s ministers who get most of the Liberal Democrat access to TV and the national press, and if all they can do in many areas is parrot Tory policies that the coalition is carrying out, we are surely doomed. Of course, when the next general election comes round, we can promote our own manifesto. But that means five years during which leading Liberal Democrats sound like Tories, and three weeks to say something different. It is simply not tenable.

Conference in Liverpool will be interesting. How far will the party be allowed to make its own Liberal Democrat policy? And how far will ministers try to browbeat the conference into supporting coalition (Tory) policy? Yet if we cannot make our own policy in the next five years, what basis will there be for a distinctive Liberal Democrat manifesto at the next election (and indeed for fighting other elections in the meantime)? If we are not distinctive, there will simply

“Ministers get most of the Liberal Democrat access to TV and the national press, and if all they can do in many areas is parrot Tory policies, we are surely doomed”

be no reasons for voting Liberal Democrat.

I said this on Radio 4’s *World at One* on 23 July and was surprised to find fan mail when I got back from holiday in August (not something I’m used to getting!). There are clearly quite a few worried and angry Liberal Democrat members and voters out there. They are not going to be appeased by the party lecturing them that what they voted for is now wrong. Unless we can get a better balance between “my government right or wrong”

and “what we stand for and are trying to change”, I fear electoral disaster beckons. Too many people are trying to fit a two-party government into pre-existing systems and conventions, and it’s not been adequately thought out.

People (notably MPs) are beginning to stir. In parliament, the new backbench policy committees were set up just before the recess covering all government departments. They are co-chaired by a backbench member from the Commons and the party spokesperson in the Lords. For instance, there’s a joint DECC/DEFRA committee co-chaired by Andrew George, Robin Teverson and myself. We’ll be meeting weekly and there is to be some access to the departments (civil servants), though whether that will result in any input from us as opposed to being ‘briefed’ by them remains to be seen. How the role of the co-chairs will link with Simon Hughes’s role as a one-man keeper of the party’s positions and conscience is not clear. How far we can campaign (inside and outside parliament) for party policy when it’s different from the coalition policy is even less clear.

I am reminded of the likes of Ramsay Muir, Elliott Dodds, Nancy Seear and Richard Wainwright and all the others who kept the faith in the 1930s and after the war, when the party was disintegrating around them in a hostile environment. The prize they bequeathed to us was a Liberal party that survived, and which (by a whisker) was sufficiently viable to form the basis for the growth and successes over the past fifty years.

I still think that, if we can get this coalition thing right, we can do much, much better than merely survive. But if things go wrong, that will become our unappealing task. I hope our people in government understand this, and understand that there really do have to be some changes in the way the coalition is operating.

Tony Greaves is a Liberal Democrat member of the House of Lords

FIELD GUIDE TO THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATS

With many journalists and lobbyists attending the Liberal Democrat conference for the first time, Simon Titley provides a handy guide to the different species they can encounter

The Liberal Democrats provide a rich and diverse fauna, with much to reward the patient observer. The autumn party conference is a good time to watch most species, as they gather to take advantage of the free food and drink before the onset of winter.

But you'll need to get out and about if you want to observe every variety of Lib Dem. Sitting in the press office reading their press releases is no substitute for the real thing. The conference auditorium is equally unrewarding; you're likely to find only one or two species hibernating.

The keen observer at conference will find richer pickings in the exhibition area, fringe meetings and hotel bars. Novice watchers needn't worry about investing in any special equipment or disguise. Normal clothing will usually suffice, unless you're in Blackpool.

It's tempting to get closer to individual Lib Dems by offering them an interview or a drink. In experienced hands, these tactics can yield more intimate observations but the novice watcher may unwittingly find himself with a new friend who is hard to shake off.

Armed with this field guide, however, you can have a rewarding time watching the Lib Dems in their natural habitat. Happy hunting!

THE STAKHANOVITE

Characteristics: The collective noun is a 'leaflet delivery cult'. Usually observed in large flocks, especially at by-elections. This species is something of an evolutionary vestige, since its intensive leafleting activity once served a clear purpose but is now a meaningless ritual.

Plumage: Generally windswept appearance, with waterproofs and a large shoulder bag. Older specimens may show scars from letterbox wounds.

Habitat: Local by-elections. At other times, can often be found clustered round the nearest Risograph printer. This species is not immediately evident at conference, where it tends to be hidden away in back-to-back ALDC training sessions.

Diet: Weak tea drunk from a Styrofoam cup in the back of a committee room.

Likes: Discussing the minutiae of Risograph printers and the layout of Focus leaflets.

Dislikes: Temperamental letterboxes and temperamental Risograph printers.

THE NAÏVE LOYALIST

Characteristics: Easily recognised by a rictus grin and lack of critical faculties, the Naïve Loyalist has a strong herd instinct and follows the party leadership wherever it goes. Although this species appears friendly, it should be treated with caution. There is always a risk that the relentless enthusiasm could collapse at any moment following a sudden realisation of the futility of it all.

Plumage: Bright yellow party tat, such as 'bird of liberty' sweatshirts.

Habitat: The front rows of the auditorium. The stall that sells bright yellow party tat.

Diet: Swallows anything the leadership offers.

Likes: The female of the species harbours secret sexual fantasies about Nick Clegg. As indeed do some of the males.

Dislikes: Media that subject the party to any sort of scrutiny or criticism; you may hear the distress call, "Why don't they report our policies?"

THE FIRST-TIME DELEGATE

Characteristics: Not in fact a separate species but the larval form of many other species. It dutifully attends every debate and fills every interval with fringe meetings, under the misapprehension that these activities are compulsory. Pupates only when the cynicism finally kicks in.

Plumage: Favours inconspicuous styles of dress at first, but the camouflage gradually wears off during conference due to a tendency to accept every sticker and lapel badge on offer.

Habitat: In daylight hours, populates most of the seats in the conference auditorium. After dark, can be found in a succession of fringe meetings, the worthier the topic the better.

Diet: The free sandwiches at fringe meetings.

Likes: Seeing the politicians in real life they've only ever previously seen on Newsnight. Guiltily collecting lots of free biros from the stalls ("They're not for me, they're for my nephew.").

Dislikes: That gnawing feeling that the real action must be going on somewhere else.

THE BUSY COUNCILLOR

Characteristics: This busy bee is always on the go. Council meetings by day, canvassing and casework by night, then more meetings at the LGA, the school governing board, various quangos, you name it. There's no time for career or family. It's no wonder this species has a short lifespan and burns out after a few years.

Plumage: The scruffy casual wear has given way to more formal power dressing, now that the job of councillor is being gradually professionalised and the allowances are more generous.

Habitat: Meetings. Meetings. And more meetings. At conference, the busy councillor will have arrived with a full schedule, to ensure the pace never lets up.

Diet: Meeting room biscuits.

Likes: Unpaid social work.

Dislikes: An existential fear of what might happen if the merry-go-round stopped.

THE PARLIAMENTARY CANDIDATE

Characteristics: The breeding cycle of this species means that large numbers exist in the run-up to a general election but few afterwards, so there are not many specimens observable. The few survivors are known as POPOs (pissed on and passed over). Candidates are nevertheless easy to spot, since they are mostly white males. The complete redrawing of constituency boundaries means we are unlikely to see a regeneration of this species for a while yet.

Plumage: Chameleon-like; they dress formally during the day to impress the media and dress down in the evening to show they're still one of the lads.

Habitat: Early in the electoral cycle, the species is free-ranging and can be observed in a variety of conference habitats. As the election approaches, candidates (who have never been a wild species) are increasingly caged by their minders, kept isolated and confined to stage-managed settings.

Diet: Sour grapes and their own bitter tears.

Likes: Being rude about the Cowley Street Campaigns Department.

Dislikes: The Cowley Street Campaigns Department.

THE '70S RADICAL

Characteristics: This veteran of the Young Liberals is now a grizzled local councillor of many years' standing. Has experienced more Liberal Revivals than you've had hot dinners. Is now appropriately cynical in the face of anything that looks like unwarranted optimism.

Plumage: Casual wear and hairstyles that haven't changed since the Croydon North-West by-election.

Habitat: In daylight hours, can be found hanging around the Liberator stall. After dark, takes refuge in the hotel bar.

Diet: Real ale. En masse, can drink a hotel bar dry by the second night of conference. The only solids taken are the free mints handed out by exhibitors.

Likes: Reminiscing about various conferences in the 1970s while praying that the photos taken by Richard Younger-Ross never resurface.

Dislikes: The soul-destroying disappointment that eventually arrives with every party leader since Jeremy Thorpe.

THE LINO

Characteristics: LINOs ('Liberals In Name Only') are a self-important group of right-wing plotters that can usually be found flocking around whoever is party leader. Metamorphoses at roughly ten-year intervals. In the 1980s, they were social

democratic and strongly pro-merger; in the 1990s, Blairite and strongly pro-'The Project'; in the 2000s, neoliberal and pro-Orange Book. Currently staring into their Blackberries trying to work out what to do next.

Plumage: Suits (literally and metaphorically).

Habitat: The Westminster Bubble. Secret meetings and dinners.

Diet: Expensive food but cheap drinks (lager or diet coke).

Likes: Generally pontificating and idly deciding other people's fate without doing any work themselves. Lecturing other people about the realities of power, even though none of them has won so much as a parish council seat.

Dislikes: The party's grassroots members.

THE RIGHT-WING LIBERTARIAN

Characteristics: The libertarian is best defined as a classical liberal who still lives with his mum. The species makes a raucous noise that creates a false impression of large numbers, but few actually exist. They infest political cyberspace, where they mainly troll on other people's blogs, saying the sort of things they would never dare say to anyone's face.

Plumage: In cyberspace, a multiplicity of pseudonyms. In real life, T-shirts given away at IT conventions, which advertise violent computer games.

Habitat: Cyberspace, 24 hours a day. You might spot one at conference, lurking in the cybercafé, but they're more likely to be in the bedroom at home, following the conference online.

Diet: Pop Tarts, Pot Noodles or anything their mum has left in the freezer that can be microwaved.

Likes: Goading the grown-ups. Arguing about how many angels can dance on a 19th-century pinhead.

Dislikes: Any form of real social contact or moral obligation to other people.

THE OLD SOG

Characteristics: The former SDP member almost became extinct twenty years ago but has been nurtured by the Liberal Democrats and now thrives in its new habitat.

Plumage: The female of the species favours the sort of power dressing that went out with Joan Collins. The male wears a crumpled suit and still wishes he went out with Joan Collins.

Habitat: The House of Lords provides the ideal climate. Can sometimes be seen in less formal Liberal Democrat habitats, where they are easily spotted by their demeanour, which resembles the strained camaraderie of a wartime aristocrat forced to share an air raid shelter with the servants.

Diet: Fine dining. It's what Woy would have wanted.

Likes: Since the Orange Book came out, has realised the Liberal left isn't so bad after all.

Dislikes: The lingering sense of bewilderment why the mould never broke when it was meant to.

Simon Titley is a member of the Liberator Collective

A QUESTION OF CONFIDENCE

Winning the Alternative Vote referendum demands the fight of most Lib Dems' political lives, but its opponents will deserve a beating, says Andrew Duff

One of the more startling fruits of the coalition pact between the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats is that, if enough Tory MPs stick to the pact, on 5 May 2011 there will be a referendum on whether to introduce the Alternative Vote (AV) for the House of Commons. This will be the first UK-wide referendum since June 1975, on EU membership. Electoral reformers need to think hard how to win it.

GETTING THE QUESTION RIGHT

The government proposes that the official question is: "Do you want the United Kingdom to adopt the 'alternative vote' system instead of the current 'first past the post' system for electing Members of Parliament to the House of Commons?"

One recalls from 1975, and again more recently from the French, Dutch and two Irish referendum campaigns on the EU treaty, that the trick in winning a referendum is to divert the campaign well away from the formal question towards something that people actually want to talk about.

The evidence is that, although voters like at first to be asked to decide things (whenever parliament surrenders its own authority to do so), the glamour of a referendum quickly wears off once the issue at hand is found to be taxing and divisive.

Much of the long-suffering electorate tend soon to dislike the intrusion of politics into their lives, even to the extent of resenting the imposition of a referendum by an irresponsibly divided political class.

Turnout in referenda therefore becomes a problem. For any constitutional referendum result to have durable legitimacy, the turnout must be respectably high. The 'Yes to AV' campaign must put energy and resources into galvanising turnout – especially in London, which will have no local elections on the same day.

Changing the subject is particularly important when the substantive case in favour of the referendum proposition is complex. The opponents of AV, such as Lord Leach, who are clever, experienced (against the euro), well funded, with the right-wing press behind them, are bound to concentrate precisely on the alleged weaknesses of the AV system.

The nay-sayers will try to exploit their initial advantage of defending the status quo – always a helpful card to play in the context of a political society which, when left to its own devices and desires, is essentially insecure about change.

The steering group established to run the 'Yes' campaign includes the Liberal Democrat strategist John Sharkey. He and his colleagues have made the right decision not to fight on the notion that AV is

only a useful first step towards achieving proportional representation. For one thing, it isn't: the huge effort and very long time it will have taken to move the Commons away from 'winner takes all' is likely to discourage yet more reform and upheaval.

PR might be assigned to the House of Lords and to local government, as it has already been to the European Parliament and the devolved parliaments, but most Westminster MPs prefer to 'own' their constituencies, finding the power-sharing that comes with PR counter-intuitive. This is especially but not only true of Tory MPs, for whom PR is seen as both a personal threat and a foreign bacillus (even if it may from time to time serve to benefit their own party).

If the 'Yes' campaign pretends (or is seen to believe) that AV is opening the door to PR, Tory voters will be repelled. To argue that AV is not good enough by itself, and that the switch to AV needs a further tweak to become proper electoral reform, would put the 'Yes' campaign immediately and irrevocably on the defensive. As it is, Nick Clegg will inevitably be attacked for once having described AV as a "miserable little compromise".

GETTING THE ARGUMENT RIGHT

The pro-AV steering group has taken an initial decision to choose as their slogan 'Yes to Fairer Votes!'

Fairness is good, of course, in a democracy but it is not magic. The 'fair votes' theme needs to be supplemented with others. AV is certainly 'fairer' than winner takes all but less fair than PR. Unless one happens to have cast a second (or lower) preference for a lowly placed candidate, one's second preference for a more popular candidate can be completely ignored in the AV count.

The fact is that AV is still a first-past-the-post system, but with the post dug in at the halfway mark rather than moving randomly. This makes a curiosity of the government's proposed wording of the referendum question and queasiness over The Question reinforces the need for the 'Yes' side to escape from it as fast as possible.

At any rate, it is not true – and should never be claimed – that under AV 'every vote counts'. Although the need to vote tactically against the party one most dislikes is rendered less acute by the opportunity to express preferences, tactical voting is not eliminated.

Another reason to downplay the 'fair votes' rhetoric is that, although the political class expects the electorate to be fair-minded, few voters are well-disposed to being so virtuous.

Too often, politicians who appeal against the

unfairness of this or that system come across as special pleading at best, and as whingeing at worst. And in the aftermath of the expenses scandals, the British public is more than ever unlikely to give its politicians the benefit of the doubt.

All things considered, the case to be made for the Alternative Vote is:

“Public opinion will be properly sceptical of the claims and counter-claims of zealots who live and die for one electoral procedure or another”

The fact that coalitions would make the UK more European should be gently but persistently made: Britain as a modern European place is an idea especially attractive to the likely-to-vote liberal intelligentsia.

The yea-sayers have little choice but to popularise the referendum by turning it into a vote of confidence on the new politics of coalition.

- It maintains the direct link between an MP and his or her constituency
- It reduces the need for tactical voting, as electors can vote for their first choice without fear of wasting their vote
- It is more inclusive, letting more voters influence the outcome
- It will encourage political parties to campaign more positively in order to attract the lower preferences of voters whose top choice is another party
- It will also go some way to restoring the credibility of the House of Commons: each MP will enjoy an equal and responsible democratic mandate.

This is both the best case for AV and a modest one. Public opinion will be properly sceptical of the claims and counter-claims of zealots who live and die for one electoral procedure or another. Those who exaggerate their academic case will wilt under the fierce scrutiny of direct democracy. Instead of attacking their opponents, therefore, it will be better for the ‘Yes’ side to ignore the arguments against AV. Such a tactic is consistent with the strategy of changing the subject.

OUTCOME NOT PROCESS

So what should the ‘Yes’ side campaign on? Not the process of electoral reform itself but its most probable outcome – namely, that AV makes coalition politics more the norm than the exception.

AV will cause even diehards to drop their assumption that their clan has a right to rule: the days of ‘the natural party of government’ are limited. This is especially so when neither the Conservative nor Labour parties command class-based allegiance, and the Lib Dems and nationalists have proven ministerial capability. AV will actually make the outcome of most elections more exciting.

Lest we forget, the case for coalition politics is:

- It requires consensus building, taking the best from each party and sidelining extremists
- Coalition governments tend to command broader public support than single party governments
- Coalition pacts need be neither hurried nor secretive
- Coalition governments are perfectly normal in successful countries like Germany and Sweden.

Referenda test the popularity of the government of the day, whether that government (or the opposition) likes it or not. Despite the quirky nature of this coalition government, which is split on the AV question, a virtual vote of confidence in the Cameron-Clegg deal one year on from the general election cannot be avoided, so it should be embraced. Voting ‘Yes’ will be a vote for change and in favour of the experiment of coalition politics, which spawned the referendum.

While this public vote of confidence in the government is going on, the bulk of the Conservative Party, which opposes electoral reform but supports the coalition, will have to follow David Cameron’s lead and play a low profile. Tory reformers (and they exist) should let the Big Society narrative play into the idea of electoral reform. This may indeed be the time to resurrect the Lib Dem slogan of the 1992 election: My Vote = Changing Britain for Good.

Labour reformers, too, will have to look to their future under a more modern electoral system, possibly recalling the glorious past when Tony Blair so brilliantly, if fleetingly, caught the theme of trustworthy, efficient modernisation.

If a genuinely cross-party AV ‘Yes’ campaign can portray itself as being consistent with and reinforcing the spirit behind this modernising coalition, it will succeed in dominating the argument and in creating a fresh status quo, which can then be effectively defended against the forces of reaction.

The nay-sayers can surely be portrayed as the usual unholy alliance of right and left, schooled in the old politics, wallowing in nostalgia for the late-lamented bust system, euroseptic and out of touch. Beating that lot will be worth the effort for its own sake.

Just as the prospect of the Liberal/SDP Alliance emerged from the 1975 referendum, a winning ‘Yes’ campaign in 2011 will throw up new potential for a credible future coalition government of the centre left. Such an outcome depends, of course, on whether the new Labour leader sticks to his own party’s 2010 election manifesto pledge to hold – and win – a referendum on AV.

Success depends, too, on the capacity and will of the Liberal Democrats to make this referendum the fight of their political lives.

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WHO WILL MANAGE TO CLIMB CLEGG'S LADDER?

Nick Clegg's speech on social mobility seemed designed to convince the country that there is more to the coalition than spending cuts, but do his ideas stand up, asks Claire Wiggins

Nick Clegg's speech on 18 August on social mobility, delivered at the height of the silly season, seemed designed to do two things. Firstly, to show that there was more to the coalition government than deficit reduction strategies and spending cuts; secondly, to set a long-term social policy objective to promote a "fairer, more open, more socially mobile society".

To underline the point, Clegg concluded the speech by saying: "In five years' time, we also want to be able to look back and say that the children born in 2015 are less constrained by the circumstances of their birth."

In effect, the coalition should be judged not just on how it reduces the deficit but also by the extent to which it improves social mobility. Is this a sensible and realistic aim and how will it play with voters and party activists alike?

To answer these questions, it's important to understand the content of the speech, which in essence was setting an overall policy framework for the next five years rather than announcing a raft of detailed policy measures. Clegg makes clear in the speech that his focus is on inter-generational social mobility; that is, the extent to which a person's income or social class is influenced by the income or social class of their parents.

POLITICALLY CHARGED

He then went on to equate fairness with social mobility – a far more contestable and politically charged statement, which was picked up by much of the subsequent blog debates both inside and outside the Lib Dems.

Debates around social mobility tend to get conflated with overlapping but nevertheless different debates around income/wealth inequality, poverty reduction, social inequalities and social exclusion.

As Clegg acknowledged in his speech, the previous Labour government often veered between these debates in a none too coherent way and only alighted on the (probably more electorally attractive) issue of social mobility towards the end of its reign. No wonder it's hard to agree on what it all means.

Clegg was explicit that anti-poverty strategies weren't enough to improve the life chances of the next generation – what he termed "pro mobility measures" were also needed. Early on in the speech, he sensibly acknowledged that social mobility is a complex and contested area of both research evidence and policy.

In short, no two economists or social scientists are ever likely to agree on what the most relevant measures of social mobility are, let alone what the metrics are telling us. Just to give a brief flavour of

the complexities involved, different academics and commentators look at either the movement between different income quartiles between generations, class/occupation changes by generation, 'relative mobility', 'absolute' or 'positive sum' mobility, international league tables of mobility, and so it goes on, giving this area a magnetic appeal for policy wonks.

It also makes it fertile territory for commentators to pick a measure that suits their policy position. A good example of this is the measure of inter-generational mobility according to income mentioned above, against which Britain does very badly in international league tables.

Much is made of this in Richard Wilkinson and Katie Pickett's oft-quoted book, *The Spirit Level* (Liberator 336 and 340). Wilkinson contends that social mobility is lowest in those countries that have the highest income inequality and therefore argues that the policy prescription should be mainly about reducing the gap between the rich and the poor through the tax and benefit system.

David Goodhart provided an interesting critique of these rather esoteric debates in *Prospect* magazine (issue 153, December 2008), and came to a somewhat different conclusion: "Although mobility [in Britain], both absolute and relative, has dropped off the high levels of the mid 20th century it still remains quite high, except at the very top and in the long tail at the bottom; the trouble is they are the places that matter most."

The article considered a range of reasons for this levelling off or decline, including structural changes to the economy and the nature of jobs on offer, more women moving into higher status jobs, recent high levels of migration and of course that hoary old chestnut, the abolition of grammar schools.

Wisely, in my view, Clegg resisted the temptation to get too entangled in these complexities but simply concluded that the evidence was not encouraging. He quoted the highly influential Sutton Trust study, which provides some evidence of declining ranges of social mobility between income groups for people born in 1958 compared with 1970, and concluded that, at best, social mobility has flat-lined over the last two or three decades. So that's the problem but what to do about it?

Generally speaking, all politicians say they want to increase social mobility in the same way that they want to improve health, wealth and happiness but it's a lot easier to say than to do. Unless you subscribe to the theory of "creating more room at the top", for example by creating more higher status jobs, one person moving up means another person moving down

and for many that's a far less palatable proposition.

Clegg identified five key sources of what he termed 'social segregation':

- the diverging paths of different children in early years
- the different extent to which different parents invest in and engage with their own children's development and progress
- the impact of parental background on educational attainment at schools
- the role of further and higher education
- the closed nature of many professions.

He concluded that there was a lot of work to be done to formulate a comprehensive social mobility strategy and picked out two areas of reform, which showed the overall direction of travel.

The first was reforming the tax system in a progressive way so that it encouraged mobility (income tax and capital gains tax were cited but mysteriously no mention of VAT). The second was focussing more resources on the most disadvantaged during early years and schooling through the pupil premium.

COLLABORATOR JIBE

To drive this all forward, Clegg will be chairing a new ministerial group and has appointed none other than Alan Milburn to report yearly on success against the strategy in 'independent' reports to parliament. Hence John Prescott's collaborator jibe!

So is this policy cocktail sufficient to make a real difference? I think all five areas listed above are a necessary part of the mix but there are some key missing areas:

- A stronger focus is needed on who gets the jobs that are going. This involves a lot more than looking at the traditional professions. These days in nearly every walk of life, it's the young people whose parents have the right contacts, can secure the right work experience placement and can afford to subsidise them through an internship – which is increasingly becoming a prerequisite of a well-paid permanent job – who are doing best from the system. Imaginative ways need to be found to provide this sort of support, encouragement and first foot on the ladder to young people whose parents aren't in a position to do so.
- The current debate around further and higher education feels far too single focused on the vexed issue of tuition fees and graduate taxes. I'd like to see much more attention being given to the right balance between funding for FE colleges/ apprentices and universities. Promoting FE colleges as places where a significant number of people can take good foundation degrees, or specialise in more vocationally focussed education, mustn't feel like the poor relation in the upcoming funding round. Similarly, there are many fine words being talked about apprenticeships, but both employers and government need to put their money where their mouth is if these routes are to be

finally seen as having equal status and esteem. Perhaps the pretty compelling evidence that the much vaunted expansion of higher education has mainly benefited the middle classes should help introduce more honesty into this debate.

- Allied with the above, much better informed and honest careers guidance is needed for all young people, coupled with taster and shadowing opportunities to broaden networks of contacts and raise aspirations; also peer mentoring and other support to help young people make informed choices about the progression paths available, with a sharp focus on additional targeted support for young people whose parents or wider family are unable to provide this.
- Housing – particularly the current segregation of different types of housing – plays a major role in reducing social mobility by restricting social networks and dampening aspirations. Much more thought needs to be given to how to achieve more mixed tenure housing to avoid the current social and geographical segregation, which spills over into the available choice of schooling.
- Given the key importance of family support, more easily available relationship support for families (in whatever form) to help prevent family breakdown where that is possible, or minimise the impact on children if families do split up. Also, more help to strengthen fragile families that can transmit 'weak' values to children, such as low self-esteem or poor emotional resilience or coping skills or lack the social capital of the extended family or neighbourhood networks.
- Probably most contentiously, but also most importantly to many Lib Dem activists and voters, more focus on income/wealth inequality, even in these financially straightened times. Like it or not, more progressive taxation measures, including Inheritance Tax, have to be on the table as part of the potential mix.

Finally a new report by the Sutton Trust has proposed that only schools that agree to give priority to disadvantaged pupils should get the pupil premium. It suggests setting that funding at £3,000 per year. It also proposes changes to the admissions rules whereby schools rated as outstanding by Ofsted should have poorer children automatically entered into their application process.

Now that really would set the cat among the pigeons, particularly if it also applied to academies and the new free schools. Otherwise, the report concludes that the expansion of academies and setting up of free schools "will lead to further social segregation among schools and hinder social mobility", which of course is pretty much where we started this whole debate.

Claire Wiggins is a member of the Liberator Collective, and has a professional background in social exclusion and social mobility

MINORITY REPORT

Liberal Democrats will not secure more elected ethnic minority representatives just by being politically virtuous and waiting for things to change; instead they must grasp positive action to reach out to these communities, says Lester Holloway

Mention positive action to deal with race and gender imbalances in Liberal Democrat circles and a typical reaction is “that’s illiberal”. Forcing change inside the party just isn’t in our DNA.

Yet when considering what can be done to make our party more representative of society, there is a tendency not to recognise fully the scale of the challenge.

There are currently no black, Asian or minority ethnic (BAME) Lib Dems in the House of Commons, the London Assembly, the Welsh Assembly, the Scottish Parliament or the European Parliament. Labour and the Conservatives are streets ahead.

We are also seriously unrepresentative at local council level, especially in the multicultural inner city areas where we are challenging Labour’s complacent assumption that the ‘black vote’ is theirs for life.

Just 13% of our MPs are women. We want to do better, but not urgently. There is an assumption that, if we keep on doing what we’ve always been doing and are successful, things will change in time, that evolution is inevitable.

Such positions fail to appreciate just how much ground the party needs to make up. Certainly within BAME communities, the reputation of the Lib Dems being a largely white, middle-class and male party is already entrenched. While the Conservatives took action to make sure they had BAME MPs to combat their reputation as a party that discriminated against people of colour, some in the Liberal Democrats assume that our image as socially progressive will insulate us against developing a similar ‘toxic’ brand that plagued the Tories before their Cameron makeover.

FIRED UP

There is also a tendency to make up excuses for our predicament rather than being fired up with passion to do something about it. There is no evidence, for example, to support the assumption that simply being more electorally successful will automatically lead to more BAMEs in parliament. Analysis of the 2010 results shows we didn’t come anywhere near gaining a black or Asian MP, including our three most hopeful seats, Leicester South, Manchester Gorton and Walthamstow. Trickle-down ‘electionomics’ has its flaws, and we clearly cannot rely on Cleggmania winning us such constituencies in four and a half years time.

Some will point to the party’s internal structure to explain why we can’t make changes. The federal nature of the party and resistance to Cowley Street ‘interference’ means progress will have to evolve naturally from the grassroots. Yet while most of the

new Tory BAME MPs represent rural seats, many Lib Dems still see BAME hopefuls being best placed to run in urban seats. Consequently, at every election the Lib Dems have at least as many black and Asian candidates as anyone else – 44 in May – but mostly in unwinnable areas. Meanwhile, party activists in regions where there are hardly any BAME people do not see it as their problem.

I’ve heard it said, “We would love to consider BAME candidates but they are just not putting themselves forward.” Yet the party has fielded a high proportion of BAME candidates for the past four general elections. Others say “they’re just not good enough,” but I believe passionately that we are all equal and that, given a level playing field, there is no reason why the best women and BAME members should not make equally as good MPs as white males.

Another frequent refrain is “there’s no such thing as a safe seat; keep working a seat and you may win at the second or third attempt.” There is more to commend this argument than any of the above excuses, however there are two flaws. Firstly, every election sees Lib Dem MPs retire but they are always replaced by another white male, with the exception of Richmond Park where Susan Kramer succeeded Jenny Tonge. These seats represent missed opportunities.

Secondly, most of the seats where BAME candidates run do not qualify for development assistance so they remain perpetually unwinnable as activists are bussed out to other constituencies during elections.

I have also encountered the attitude that says race and gender simply don’t matter at all – it’s all about the policies, and women and BAME communities care about the same issues as everyone else. They add that our social policies will benefit those sections of society.

This is true, yet equally true is that in modern politics image seals the deal. The primary reason a BAME voter will pick the Lib Dems is because of our education or housing or transport policies. But if they feel we don’t fully represent them or understand issues that specifically or disproportionately affect them their support for us is likely to be fleeting. They are unlikely to join the party or seek election, and as a result we end up missing out on talent that would shine in parliament.

CYCLE OF FAILURE

We will break this cycle of failure when the party collectively recognises that we cannot go on like this, and that belief in evolution and our own good intentions are not going to deliver any time soon.

Quite simply it would be unacceptable to emerge from the 2015 general election with another all-white Commons team. Unless we do something, that is a real

possibility.

The more I talk to black and Asian people about the Liberal Democrats, the more convinced I am that urgent and radical action is needed now. The lack of urgency felt by some party members can be explained largely because they are not truly hearing what those communities are saying about us.

If we are not truly connected to BAME voters, we are vulnerable to the odd black or Asian Liberal Democrat reassuring us that everything is okay. There will be one or two at the Federal Conference taking this position, mainly to benefit themselves.

The small minority of BAME members who want to tell us that evolution will bear fruit simply because our intentions are pure does not represent their own communities or the majority of BAME activists in the party.

The last day of conference will see a motion proposed by the Ethnic Minority Liberal Democrats to change the way we select our candidates. It's not about positive discrimination, as there are no measures that guarantee BAME representation.

The proposal is for positive action – giving greater opportunities to BAME hopefuls while at the same time leaving the decisions about PPC candidates firmly in the hands of local members. By ensuring that there is a place for BAME members on every shortlist in a winnable seat, more local parties will get to see the quality of such would-be candidates at close quarters. Of course, local parties are still free to pick the white male – and in many cases that is entirely appropriate where they are the best candidate. But I believe there is enough BAME talent out there to win through given the opportunities.

“The more I talk to black and Asian people about the Liberal Democrats, the more convinced I am that urgent and radical action is needed now”

We already have a rule that there must be at least one woman on every shortlist and an expectation that, for example, a shortlist of six would comprise three women.

The EMLD motion also calls for ‘zipping’ of multi-member lists, such as Assembly and European elections. The London Region has already done this by specifying that one of the top four London Assembly candidates must be of a BAME background.

Again there is no guarantee this will deliver results if voters return three Lib Dem AMs, but it gives the party a far greater chance of gaining BAME

representation. This is not new ground for the party; we ‘zipped’ the European election lists for women in 1999.

Far from being ‘illiberal’, these proposals will make us more liberal by allowing a fairer choice of candidates and by not excluding whole sections of society. Missing out on talented BAME potential MPs through unwillingness to change is deeply conservative.

As a Liberal Democrat, I would have preferred that we would not need any rule changes, but I also see the damage our lack of diversity is having on our reputation. I have no confidence that belief in good intentions will make a difference. If we do not grasp the nettle now, we may forever be the least representative party in British politics.

Lester Holloway is a Liberal Democrat councillor in Sutton
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SUDAN - HOW THE WEST LOST THE SOUTH

As a referendum on the future of war-torn Sudan approaches, the West is poised to tick the box and move on. It may regret being midwife to an extreme new Islamist regime in Khartoum, says Becky Tinsley

No one familiar with Sudan was surprised that last April's presidential election was brazenly rigged, or that millions of its black African citizens were denied a vote, or that opposition activists and journalists were intimidated and beaten up.

More noteworthy is what the poll, and the forthcoming referendum on southern secession, reveals about 'the international community', as the Western donor nations are known. Supposedly independent observers declared the elections merely flawed by technical and administrative problems. No one was vulgar enough to mention that Field Marshall Omar Bashir, a man indicted for genocide, ethnic cleansing and war crimes by the International Criminal Court, fixed the vote and claimed victory.

All the signs are the North-South secession referendum in January will be a whitewash. But, by ignoring massive human rights abuses and fraud, the west is unwittingly signalling to the wily Khartoum regime, based in the mainly Arab north, that it can continue to wage war and ethnic cleansing by proxy, with escalating insecurity in the oil-rich south and Darfur.

Among the dozens of civil society leaders that our Waging Peace team interviewed in South Sudan, we met none who believed President Bashir will hand over the oil without a fight. So far, Khartoum has worn down all concerned in negotiations on where the border will be between North and South, and how the divorce will be managed. Those familiar with the Darfur peace negotiations will recognise the tactics: Khartoum agrees to the big issues, having no intention of sticking to its promises, and then quibbles at length about the

details.

The Obama administration, increasingly siding with Bashir, is said to be strong-arming the Southern Sudanese representatives to surrender more oil revenues to Khartoum in a renegotiated alimony deal. Most disappointing, the Southern rebels have been bought off at every stage, seduced by Khartoum with ministerial cars and titles.

BREATHTAKING ABOUT-TURN

In a breathtaking about-turn that has left Southern citizens furious and bewildered, their leaders are now divided on whether or not their long-suffering people should want unity with their long-time oppressors in Khartoum. Why? Because those same politicians have been told they will be included in the new government if Sudan stays unified. Evidently twenty years of

bloodshed are forgotten with the promise of a few Mercedes and international junkets.

It is widely assumed that if the South votes for secession it will be ruled by corrupt, incompetent, self-interested 'big men' and former rebels. There are no grounds to believe life will improve for the black African Sudanese, who

have endured decades of genocide and ethnic cleansing by Khartoum's proxies. To illustrate how poor the area is, consider this UN statistic: a 15-year-old girl is more likely to die in childbirth than to complete her primary education.

However, little attention is paid to what will remain of Sudan, including Khartoum, where President Bashir's power lies, and several marginalised and neglected regions, the most famous of which is Darfur. Bashir's National Congress Party, elected in April's charade of an election, is tightening the screws of



what will be the new North Sudan. The NCP is unashamedly Islamist, the hard-line form of political Islam entailing complete control of the judiciary, all aspects of government, civil society and the economy. It openly confesses its hatred of gays, women, Jews, black Africans and, most of all, Arabs who disagree with the party's version of Islam.

Brave Sudanese NGOs are literally risking their lives to speak out about increasing totalitarianism, but they are ignored because the international community wants the referendum provisions of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement to be seen as fulfilled. The CPA, negotiated by the USA, UK and Norway, brought to an end twenty years of conflict between Khartoum and South Sudan, a war that cost the lives of two million mainly black African southerners.

President Obama's special envoy, Scott Gration, believes that by rewarding and legitimising Bashir, his regime will respond by stopping killing its own citizens. He calls for carrot and sticks but, although Khartoum routinely breaks its own commitments, it is never punished. Khartoum draws the obvious conclusions, and continues killing its own people.

Earlier this year, Gration announced that the war in Darfur was over, and urged talk of 'development' there rather than protecting civilians. Yet, since February, the Sudanese armed forces have been repeatedly attacking villages and murdering unarmed people in the Jebel Marra area of Darfur. The toothless UN/African Union peacekeepers are so cowed by Khartoum that they have not even asked permission to investigate the reported deaths of thousands of Darfuris.

MASSIVE DEATH TOLL

No NGOs or media are allowed into a vast region, and no one knows what is happening there. Humanitarian groups have been excluded, and charities that have heard survivors' horrific testimony dare not speak out for fear of being expelled from Sudan. Waging Peace's contacts in Darfur tell of a massive death toll, but the people whom we contact are increasingly afraid even to talk on the phone: they know Khartoum is monitoring them.

So, why is the Obama administration apparently siding with an indicted war criminal against Sudan's black African people in the South and Darfur? Is it naivety or cynicism? Or perhaps the US president has other priorities, like getting re-elected in an improving domestic economic climate.

One theory is that, in place of a well thought out foreign policy, the Obama folk automatically do the opposite to the Bush people. Bush, placating his



religious right base, stood squarely behind the (mainly Christian) Southern Sudanese.

But Washington insiders believe the reason why Obama is placating Khartoum is the war on terror. President Bashir has convinced the Pentagon he is on their side against Al Qaeda, despite his avowed Islamism, and despite giving Bin Laden a sanctuary for five years. America's greater security concerns are in neighbouring Somalia

and nearby Yemen, where Bashir's security services are supposedly helping to monitor terrorist training camps.

The US has just constructed its biggest African embassy in Khartoum, and has built a massive military intelligence listening post in Sudan. Only a few in Washington, notably the State Department's Susan Rice, seem concerned that Bashir's regime is the ideological brother-in-arms of the terrorists in both Somalia and Yemen. But Rice has been overruled by Hillary Clinton and Gration.

According to our contacts in Sudan's besieged civil society, Western meddling has left them with the worst of all outcomes: Field Marshall Bashir emerges massively strengthened from a fraudulent election, claiming legitimacy in the eyes of both Arab and African regional bodies. There are also signs that Washington may drop its sanctions against Sudan, and the UN will be under immense pressure to suspend the ICC warrant against Bashir. The message to dictators around the globe is "carry on as you were, but pay lip service to being on our side against Al Qaeda".

Sudanese democracy activists fear Gration will pressure Darfuri civil society groups and rebels to accept meaningless peace deals with no specific sanctions if the Khartoum regime breaks its word. Sudan's displaced millions thus have no reason to believe it is safe to return home, meaning justice and lasting peace are a distant as ever for the long-suffering people of Darfur.

Meanwhile the voices of the majority of Sudanese, be they Arab or Africa, Muslim or Christian, have yet to be heard. There is a word for what the international community has been up to in Sudan: appeasement. Any school child knows there is never a happy ending when diplomats chose appeasement over tough decisions.

Becky Tinsley is director of Waging Peace www.WagingPeace.info

REPLANTING THE TORIES' SCORCHED EARTH

Uncaring Tories relish the prospect of cutting public services but, once a recovery comes, Liberal Democrats should be pressing for their expansion to help those left behind in society, says Richard Kemp

It sounds a bit of an oxymoron this next question. "Will we be able to deliver better public services with less money?"

The instinctive response from Lib Dems is "no". Of course, we believe that there should be a high quality basic provision of public services to enhance the life chances of every individual and to ensure that every community is equally pleasant and safe to live in.

But if money is the answer, why is it that the massive increase in public spending made by the last Labour government did not lead to concomitantly high levels of improvement in public service delivery?

I think that there are three reasons for this:

- ☛ Labour passed too many acts of parliament that meddled with systems and did not allow managers to bed down service delivery. Examples of this include the fact that the NHS was reorganized three times in twelve years, and every year there was a new Criminal Justice Bill presented.
- ☛ Delivery was silo based. It was passed to specialists who thought that their way was either the only way or the only important way to improve service delivery.
- ☛ It invented too many quangos, layers of bureaucracy and organisations, which often fought for territory and confused the situation. As an example, when the Learning and Skills Council was abolished and 66% of its money transferred to local councils, three new quangos were invented to replace it!

Let me give just three examples of where the multiplicity of organisations hinders and does not improve service delivery. In the Baby Peter case, fourteen organisations were responsible for looking after Peter and his family. All got their outputs but none took overall responsibility. No-one wanted the outcome of Peter dying, but that is what happened.

If you leave prison as a 20-year-old, there are at least thirteen people from nine different organisations responsible for trying to keep you from returning. All the people and organisations get their output boxes ticked, but which of the organisations had the target of the 80% failure rate that exists?

AWAYDAYS AND OUTPUTS

In Leicestershire, more than forty organisations deal with various aspects of drug prevention and drug dependence assistance. All those organisations have their mission statements and awaydays and get their outputs. But whose outcome is it that so many drug users simply cannot make the system work for them, and don't know where to go?

The last two of these examples have been culled from thirteen official Total Place pilots and more than fifty unofficial ones, which looked at how services were provided in a locality.

They revealed a widespread waste of money with too many layers of government, bureaucracies and quangos delivering services in a haphazard way. This means poor service delivery and poor value.

The question was continually asked – "To deal with this problem would you spend the money you spend, in the way you spend it, through the organisations you spend it with to achieve the outcomes that you currently get if you had a blank sheet of paper?" The answer was invariably, "You must be joking!"

The Total Place approach has now been encapsulated in an offer made to central government on behalf of local government called 'place based budgeting'. Instead of pepper potting bits of money from central government to local deliverers, add it all up – give (say) 10% less to the area via the council and let the council and its partners sort out the best delivery mechanisms and use of the cash against local priorities.

With 25% cuts in funding underway, these and other decisions will need to be made.

Some cuts have been very easy to make. The Local Government Association (LGA) was easily able to offer up £100bn of savings in the lifetime of the parliament by a massive reduction in quangos, levels of government and delivery mechanisms.

The abolition of many of these bodies will enable us to deliver our services in a more joined-up way. It will take away the old excuse that we councillors have been able to wield for almost forty years – don't blame us, blame the government, they took the decision.

The government has responded to the LGA request and more than forty councils have submitted bids to the Treasury to begin the place based budgeting process. The government has gone further and has already begun the process of passing some service delivery and service oversight back to councils.

WE SHOULD BE THE OPPOSITION

Labour won't do it and MPs are committed to the coalition, so party members must supply the constructive opposition the government needs, says Simon Molloy

It is the best of times, it is the worst of times – an epoch of belief and of incredulity – a spring of hope and, maybe, a winter of electoral despair. But it's happening beyond us. As Liberal Democrat activists, we're not working to support a Liberal Democrat government, nor are we working for the opposition. We are the peasantry, waiting in a void – and for what?

Party president Ros Scott tells us we have important roles to play as fundraisers, policy developers, trainers, managers, conference stewards and returning officers. Fine – we do need all that and she has to see that these jobs are done. But it's not enough. That's just internal stuff. We have greater and wider responsibilities.

I think we should be providing the government with a constructive opposition.

Labour's idea of opposition seems to be rooted in the old, shallow, Blairite culture of knee-jerk and spin. Harriet Harman declared in her budget response that Liberal Democrats “have sacrificed everything they ever stood for” – ignoring the long list of our manifesto promises featured in the budget, the coalition agreement and the Queen's Speech. More recently, she's been running with David Davis's meaningless jibe about a “Brokeback coalition”.

Labour ex-ministers who have agreed to advise the coalition have been labelled “collaborators” by Lord Prescott – tribal jargon. David Miliband said that the proposal to stop free milk for nurseries had “dark echoes of Thatcher snatching milk from a previous generation” – totally irrelevant to whether the new proposal was right or wrong.

That's not intelligent opposition. Labour is feeding thoughtless fodder to lazy journalists, and lazy journalists fill their headlines with these silly gifts.

SILLY SOUNDBITE

Intelligent opposition is vital to any government. It's urgent with this one. How wise, for example, was that proposal to cut nursery milk? Does it provide an effective and efficient benefit? Could the money be better targeted? Did No.10 deliver an ill-considered, knee-jerk reaction when it suddenly scuppered the idea? I don't know. But that decision needs a mature challenge, not a silly Miliband soundbite.

Are we rushing through bad legislation on health and education? Dynamism is great – we can't let safely-safely civil servants drag our feet – but we must insist on proper opportunities to debate and improve government proposals before they are sealed into law. If the Ministry of Defence rather than the Treasury is going to pay for renewing Trident, shouldn't the

military rather than the politicians decide whether it's worth having? At least put it into the Defence Review.

We need a sensibly-argued challenge to the fairness claims in the budget. Great that our policy of bringing more of the lowest paid out of tax is in there, but the Institute for Fiscal Studies has claimed that the overall package is regressive, hitting the poorest hardest. Disagreements between the IFS and the government over finer statistical interpretations suggest that we are not honouring the fairness commitment in our manifesto as clearly as the coalition agreement promised. Should we be pushing for greater redistribution?

Labour has shouted the easy shout on such issues but I don't hear it sustaining incisive, reasoned arguments. So it falls to us – you and me – to provide constructive opposition. As committed Liberal Democrats, devoid of collective cabinet responsibility, we can support our ministers in their bids to realise Lib Dem principles but challenge them when they appear to give way. We must argue, affirm, question, remind.

Press reports in the summer suggested that Conservative ministers would be invited to address our autumn conference. The idea was mad.

Many Lib Dem members and voters were shocked/dismayed/surprised at our party entering a coalition with the Conservatives. Part of the shock was at the amount of Lib Dem policy negotiated into the headlines of the coalition agreement and the Queen's Speech. Well done Nick. He persuaded us to give it a go – to see if the detail and outcome would match the headlines.

Two other reasons for giving coalition a go: the country's financial, ecological and political crises need to be tackled in a stable environment; it was the responsibility of all political parties to seek that stability; the Liberal Democrats and the Tories took up the challenge. And our own political movement has campaigned for decades for proportional representation, which must often lead to minority or coalition governments; so we have to try to make them work.

At the same time, there are many principled and practical reasons why our members joined the Liberal Democrats rather than the Conservative Party and why millions of people voted for the Liberal Democrats rather than the Conservatives. Many of the compromises that have been made within the coalition are ugly to us.

We must have a chance to present our compromises to the public – to explain what differences a majority Lib Dem government would have made – to discuss and present Lib Dem policies for a future Lib

Dem government – to show why we are not Conservatives.

And our main chance to do that in public is at our national party conferences. It must not be muddled by Tory salesmen. The conference chair has said that the possibility of inviting Conservative ministers to address us from the conference platform was considered but rejected. Good.

We have joined the coalition government, I believe, for honourable reasons. But it is still a tale of two parties, distinct in principles and priorities. You and I have a duty over these five years to keep alive and public the principles and priorities of the Liberal Democrats – through conference, Focus, press releases and public meetings. Clean and clear.

CAMPAIGN AGAINST AV

On electoral reform, none of us, I believe, should be campaigning for AV. It isn't PR. It isn't fair. It was never Lib Dem policy. It is one of those ugly coalition compromises. Our MPs should vote against the referendum proposal when it comes before parliament.

No one wants AV. It was a sticky little sweet held out by the Tories to lure Lib Dems into partnership. Neither party believes in it and Labour is planning to fight it. If we campaign and vote for AV, we are accepting Cameron's humbug and pleasing no one.

What right have MPs to limit our choice of voting systems, anyway? It's all about their job selection, so they have a vested interest! They include people who tried to skew the Freedom of Information Act to serve their own interests. They include people who screwed the parliamentary expenses system in their own interests. Many have safe seats to protect. Remind the public of all that and make sure MPs are sidelined on this voting referendum. This is a choice for voters.

If we fight for AV and lose, we may not get another chance of electoral reform for generation. Certainly not with the Tories. A future Labour government – or coalition partner – is less likely to bother with PR if we've just introduced AV or if we've fought for it and lost. We must ditch the referendum right now, before it gets off the ground. Campaign loudly for PR – that is Liberal Democrat policy – that's what Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, the EU and most European democracies have – so why not us?

The future of Liberal Democracy demands that we hold our leaders to account by providing constructive opposition, that we keep clear and public our development of Liberal Democrat policies for the next parliament and that we don't allow PR to be kicked into touch for another generation.

So let's start the benign revolution. It will strengthen our party and our ministers. And it is a far, far better thing than waiting around in a void.

Simon Molloy is vice-chair of Hackney Liberal Democrats and joined the Liberal Party in 1964

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Public health will become a council function from April 2012 and most public health professionals are delighted. Councils will have a 'lock' on the interface between health and social care to ensure a tighter link up of service delivery, especially to the elderly.

Not everything is being done in true localist fashion. Education is still being exempted from localist control. Communities and local government secretary Eric Pickles talks localism but then tries to micro-manage councils, but the general direction for joining up locally is good and eminently supportable by Lib Dems.

LIB DEM-TORY FAULT LINE

But then we come to a major fault line between the Tories and ourselves. We both believe that services can be designed to deliver better results more cost effectively. The Tories then want to save the money to reduce the role of the state; we Lib Dems want to save the money in the short term to deal with the appalling state of the country's finances. However, we then want to re-expand public services to meet many gaps in service delivery, particularly for those in most need.

You can see that in the way that Tories present their proposals. Cuts are made with relish; there is little understanding of the long-term problems that people face, and even less understanding that the way we have constructed our society means that that the middle class have drawn up the gangplank to ensure less social mobility and that the poor, deserving or otherwise, always remain the poor.

For the foreseeable future, many people will need social housing and more of it because so many are trapped in jobs that will never pay enough to enable them to pay full rents or buy a house.

Dealing with inter-generational poverty of aspiration and hope will take many years to put right. Increasing numbers of us will first become elderly and then will lose both our mental and physical faculties. Our environment will need enhanced protection, as the private sector still prefers to pollute and save short-term cash.

Now is the time to reinforce our credentials as a caring party. We need to show people that beyond the vale of financial depression there are more sunny uplands where Lib Dems will call, as we have always done, for high-quality services for all, decided upon, delivered and managed locally. Our message must not change – but in these circumstances we must become ever more strident in delivering it.

Richard Kemp is a long-standing Liberal Democrat councillor in Liverpool and leader of the Lib Dems in the Local Government Association

ALL TOGETHER NOW

Choosing a parliamentary candidate isn't just about the person for the job, it's also whether they will contribute to a team, says Mark Pack

Spend time talking to Liberal Democrat members about how the party should or shouldn't go about selecting its Westminster parliamentary candidates and pretty soon you'll hear someone say, usually in the context of whether or not we have too many male white candidates, "But it should be about selecting the best person for the job".

Even people who argue for either positive action or positive discrimination frequently accept the underlying assumption – but argue that to get the best person for the job requires a broader vision, taking into account wider discrimination in society and so on.

Yet selecting a candidate who we hope will become the MP for a constituency isn't just about selecting someone to be that local MP, it is also about selecting someone who may join the Liberal Democrat parliamentary parties. And good parliamentary parties, just like good council groups, are team affairs.

Putting together a good team, whether in politics, elsewhere in the public sector, in the private sector or for voluntary groups, is always about more than just the individual merits of the team members. It is also about having the right balance of skills, breadth of experience and a group of people who can work together so as to be more, rather than less, than the sum of their parts.

Having a good parliamentary team matters for its direct impact on parliament, and matters also because the parliamentary team is a key component of the party's wider policy-making process, its shop front to the public and for the major part it plays in the leadership of our organisation.

Why then do we so often debate the rules for selection or the merits of individual candidates as if it were all about the selection of an individual and not also the hopeful addition of a new team member? Sports fans know only too well that getting the best team isn't simply a matter of selecting individuals on their own merits; the overall balance of the team is crucial.

So too in politics; saying that selecting candidates is simply about the best person for the job shouldn't be seen as a powerful statement of the obvious. It's an erroneous statement of the narrow-minded.

Balancing the individual and team roles is not always easy or straightforward, even though striking that balance is something many local parties are already partly used to thanks to selecting teams of local election candidates for multi-member wards at council level.

One of the difficulties in striking the right balance for the Westminster parliament is that hundreds of selections are run independently, spread out over time and by different organisational units.

By contrast, multi-member ward selections are done at the same time by the same group of people – making balancing a team much easier. Indeed, many local parties in effect select local election candidates in one big go, doing most if not all wards at once and with a beady eye on the overall balance of the team.

If the party decides to take it, there is an opportunity coming up to make it easier for party members to consider team factors when selecting parliamentary candidates. The changes in parliamentary boundaries being introduced by the coalition government will necessitate far more crossing of local government boundaries by the new constituency boundaries. As a result, the party will have to get used to far more cases where local party boundaries cannot neatly match local and Westminster boundaries.

That enforced need to work together, on a larger stage and across existing units, provides an opportunity to move towards running more selections for groups of neighbouring seats at the same time (and, in England, a greater role for regional parties in facilitating this). If, for example, two neighbouring council areas each have their own parliamentary seat but also two that cross between them, selecting all four seats at one go provides some logistical advantages but also provides the opportunity to move towards a greater emphasis on thinking about the team when selecting candidates. Such combined selections would also give a helpful nudge in the direction of encouraging local parties to work together more across existing boundaries, sharing resources and skills.

In many areas, we are already used to the idea that party members get a vote in selections for more than just the ward or the constituency they live in; for example, in a London borough party they may get votes for all of the borough's parliamentary candidates and all the local election candidates too.

As with those London rules, the way to do this is not by enforced central diktat, but rather by removing some of the central straightjacket rules and giving areas the power to do this where they wish. In some places, the geography of boundaries and parties will make it an obvious and sensible choice; in others it won't. That is fine – localism is, after all, something we are quite comfortable with as a party. But above all, what a missed opportunity it would be if new boundaries are just met with the old party rules.

Mark Pack is co-editor of Liberal Democrat Voice (www.libdemvoice.org) and has been involved in writing several sets of selection rules

INVASION OF THE BLUE PARROTS

The banking crisis showed that those who argue that the state was irrelevant were naïve and gullible, but a new approach to the voluntary sector could help the Liberal Democrats carve out their own view of public services, says Simon Hebditch

Creating effective public services has been at the centre of the political debate for the last decade. Public funds have been poured into education, the national health services and, to a lesser extent, public transport. Although much has been improved over the last ten years, we have not witnessed a revolution in public service provision – rather it has continued to be offered in a haphazard way with little co-ordination and meagre evidence of planning for the benefit of service users.

The principles underlying this article revolve around a mix of relevant concepts – extending power to the user/consumer, decentralisation/devolution, the belief in the right of the individual to chart her/his progress in society and the rights and responsibilities of us all if we wish to live in a democratic and participatory community.

This is, to put it mildly, a difficult time for Liberal Democrats. A coalition, or at least agreement to support a minority administration, was inevitable after the last election – and potentially continuous coalitions of one sort or another are an ingredient of electoral reform, so we had better get used to it! However, I do not believe that we should parrot the traditional Tory desire to cull the state. We are in danger of simply subscribing to a Tory vision that is the antithesis of Liberal values.

So, it is vital that the Liberal Democrats develop their own distinct vision of the role of the state in the twenty-first century – taking full account of current developments and the experiences of the last 13 years.

Nowadays, many tend to shy away from the very idea of an ideology that underpins their actions. When the Labour government ascended to power in 1997, lots of leading personalities in the voluntary sector felt the time had arrived for their interests and perspectives to be recognised. The lean years of conservatism could be consigned to history and a new era embarked upon.

CONSIDERABLE SHOCK

There was considerable shock when it became clear that the guiding principle of the Labour administration was going to be supporting ‘what worked’ rather than a guiding value in relation to the sort of society the Labour movement wanted to create.

Now what could possibly be wrong with that? Surely, it is vital that the actual needs of individuals and communities are met practically rather than indulging in political gamesmanship.

The fact that we can all point to multiple problems

in the provision of state services – overweening bureaucracy, a lack of flexibility and responsiveness to individuals in need of services, and the propensity to move with the speed of a snail – does not alter the basic concept that a state is endowed by its citizens, in a democracy, with the responsibility to both protect and nurture its population.

The new public debate about the role of the state will now be suffused with the implications of the financial turmoil in 2008/09 and the subsequent plunge into recession. Liberal Democrats took a leading and highly credible position on the ‘credit crunch’ and witnessed the growing reputation of Vince Cable both among opinion formers and the general public.

We witnessed the creation of a partly nationalised banking sector and the sight of commercial banks arriving, cap in hand, at the Treasury to ask the state to bail them out. All those who argued for either a diminishing role or even the irrelevance of the state in a modern capitalist economy were shown to be naïve and gullible.

The outcome of the last election led inexorably towards some form of joint approach by the main political parties – a requirement that will be a permanent feature of the political landscape once electoral reform has been won. So parties must talk to each other about political programmes and greater co-operation. The sight of previous opponents agreeing on a joint political programme should not shock us.

However, Liberal Democrats must not allow the need for co-operation to lead to a retreat by the state from its responsibilities. Devolution and decentralisation, an emphasis on ‘localism’ and the consequent variations in services around the country are all laudable principles but there must be a partnership between the state and society for an effective participatory community to be energised.

The fiscal and economic crisis in 2008 was mitigated by the government, on behalf of the national community, saving the banks and our economic infrastructure.

No amount of localism would have sufficed to combat the international markets at that point. Therefore, we must have a balance between the roles of central government on the one hand and enabling communities to exercise power and influence on the other.

It is the current fashion to call for a smaller state and replace it with a ‘big society’. These are not alternatives. David Cameron’s big society philosophy, while genuinely held, is coming at precisely the time

when big cuts are expected in public expenditure and so will be associated in the public mind with the provision of public services on the cheap.

It is in this context that I believe Liberal Democrats must re-assert their views about a positive and vital role for the state in providing a framework within which society can develop and prosper. Of course, we have a particular vision of the role of the state and emphasise its need to decentralise and devolve

power but we must not downplay the essential role of the state in mediating priorities and, even more importantly, protecting the interests of its citizens.

VOLUNTARY ROLE

My contention is that voluntary and community organisations could play an enhanced role in the provision of public services within the context of sustaining an important role for the state. At the moment, only 2% of all 'public services' are delivered by voluntary organisations. There could be two responses to this low level. First, it is so small that commissioners of services may feel it is not even worth bothering about the potential of the voluntary sector. But it could be argued just as strongly that such a low base point illustrates the potential for growth and that we should simply go for it.

If you look carefully at the policy positions of the main parties, it is difficult to push the proverbial cigarette paper between their standpoints on the voluntary sector. For a variety of reasons, all parties argue that they would like to see voluntary organisations and community groups providing increased services and complementing the role of the public sector.

However, it is necessary to move on from the rhetoric to the reality. What has to be done to enable voluntary organisations to increase their role in the provision of services?

First, the state must provide a beneficial economic and financial framework within which organisations can operate effectively. That means appropriate tax reliefs for charities, and enabling social enterprises and community interest companies to enter the field of service provision, especially in deprived areas of the country, by ensuring that they receive the sort of economic and financial allowances and incentives that are traditionally made available to the private sector.

Second, the government needs to make sure that the rules and regulations surrounding the commissioning of services are fair and accessible to voluntary organisations. Recently, despite encouragement from the government to voluntary groups to bid for the Pathways to Work contracts offered by the Department of Work and Pensions, very few actual contracts were awarded to the voluntary sector. The government cannot laud the sector one minute and then erect unfair barriers to involvement subsequently.

Therefore, such rules and regulations should be

“We are in danger of simply subscribing to a Tory vision that is the antithesis of Liberal values”

reviewed and made more 'sector friendly' if government's own objectives are to be met, let alone the aspirations of many thousands of committed and first class voluntary sector providers. I hasten to add that I am not arguing for special conditions for the voluntary sector, which would automatically put it at an advantage over existing public sector providers and the private sector, just a fair approach that emphasises the central importance of a level

playing field.

PULLING HEARTSTRINGS

All parties must beware the tendency of some in the voluntary sector to argue that voluntary organisations are, by definition, 'doing good' and should be treated more favourably as a result. There is a temptation in the sector to pull at the heartstrings but such efforts should be resisted. I am also not arguing that everything is always rosy in the voluntary sector. Voluntary organisations can often be more competitive than the private sector!

There is a debate around the concept of scale in relation to voluntary organisations bidding for service delivery contracts. Often, voluntary groups simply cannot compete with private sector bidders in relation their scale of operation and consequent costs ratios. One response to this problem is to encourage more voluntary organisations to work together in consortia when bidding for major contracts. Equally, many would argue that the very process of having to work at a greater scale favours bigger organisations and discriminates against smaller, more locally based, ones.

There is a clear trend towards more personalised services. Who can argue against the view that an individual should have a right to receive the appropriate service rather than having to put up with whatever is being offered by the provider?

We need to be clear, from a Liberal Democrat perspective, that the rights of the individual citizen must be paramount in identifying appropriate services and there is also no problem with the concept that the right level of funding should be available to the individual rather than residing in the institution.

In Sweden, there is now a legal right for citizens to be able to choose the service delivery provider they want, whether public sector, voluntary organisations or private business.

The Liberal Democrats, with their unique commitment to the principles of liberal democracy and individual liberty, have the opportunity to produce a comprehensive approach to the future of public services. It is vital that this area of policy making is undertaken sooner rather than later.

Simon Hebditch is an active Liberal Democrat committed to the realignment of the left and works in the voluntary and community sector. He was among Liberator's founders

THE EXTREMISTS DISGUISED IN LIBERAL CLOTHES

The term 'liberal' is being abused by those obsessed with hatred of the state and should be reclaimed, says Matthew Huntbach

The Economist magazine of 14 August 2010 had a striking cover depicting David Cameron with a Mohican hairstyle and the words "Radical Britain: The West's most daring government".

The article it referred to covered the ideology of Cameron's government, and the extreme measures it is taking. It is a mark of the times that some now call this ideology 'radical liberal', since it is far from the ideology generally endorsed by *Liberator* magazine. *Liberator* has been the flagship of what it has always called 'radical liberalism' since it was founded in the 1970s, when it had the term to itself.

There has been a movement recently for an extreme right-wing ideology to steal the term liberalism for itself, sometimes adding the qualifier 'economic' or 'classical' or 'nineteenth century'.

This ideology is extreme right-wing because it defends the wealth and powers of those who rule over us. That is what 'right wing' means as opposed to 'left wing', which is about challenging those powers. It uses the term 'liberal' to disguise what it is really about or to give it greater standing by claiming false historical antecedents.

When I read what those who use this term of themselves write today, and what was written by those who called themselves 'liberal' in the nineteenth century, I find a completely different tone.

SHRIEKING ATTITUDES

There is none of the shrieking anti-state attitude. Instead, the state is treated pragmatically; its use for the provision of public services accepted as part of progressive improvement, with local government as we know it now founded to provide them; its democratisation welcomed, though with an air of caution recognising the dangers of mob rule leading to tyranny, most obviously illustrated by the French revolution and its aftermath.

There is also a strong moral tone, often coming from nineteenth century liberalism's links with non-conformist Christianity. While this can become priggish, its concern for human well-being and dignity is strikingly different from the dog-eat-dog with the weakest going to the wall mentality of those who today claim to be 'nineteenth century' or 'classical' liberals.

A better term for this right-wing movement is 'economism', a word that has occasional previous use meaning the belief that all politics can be reduced to economics.

It suits well an ideology where the provision of any service through a mechanism other than a financial

market is derided, and for all problems the solution is "open it up to free market competition to drive up quality".

The movement is right-wing and not a form of liberalism, however much it claims to be, because it is not just cautious about some aspects of democracy, as were nineteenth century liberals, but inherently anti-democratic.

It is about deriding and taking away what we Liberals celebrate when we sing "Why should we be beggars with the ballot in our hand?" It is about transferring power from the ballot – where we are equal – to the financial market where individual power depends on wealth. We live in a complex society where few of us own the means for independent long-term survival, many just a month or two's salary from penury. It does, therefore, reduce most of us to beggars, pleading to the few who have substantial wealth ownership for our very survival.

A growing number of skilled people, desperate for work, are finding they simply cannot get any. 'Beggars' is an appropriate word for many made redundant recently or newly graduated or school-leavers.

Liberalism in the nineteenth century, in the UK and elsewhere in Europe, stood against the powers of the day, the aristocracy and the established church.

These powers were, to some extent, the 'state', as we can see from the composition of the House of Lords. Free market trading was endorsed as essential to liberalism in the UK, to break the aristocratic hold over land and hence food supplies. Private companies were mainly small scale and local; there was little like the big chain suppliers, which now provide most of our goods and services. Liberal endorsement for free market economics in the nineteenth century needs to be seen in this light; the language used then cannot be applied now as if the economy is still like that, except as a cruel trick or as extreme naivety.

As we entered the twenty-first century, the big corporations had become what the church and aristocracy were for nineteenth-century liberals. They place us in a situation where we are forced to be dependent on them; they cow us with stories designed to keep us docile and obedient to them, and their leaders live lives of extreme luxury at our expense. We may think of the business leaders and bankers as the dukes and earls, and the entertainment industry as the church providing the "opium of the people".

Economism is the ideology of the modern enemies of true liberalism, and they promote it ruthlessly. It is an ideology that has infected our party, firstly when

aspects of it seeped into our party in the shape of an extreme free market fringe, which appeared suddenly from nowhere a few years ago; secondly when we were forced by circumstances into a coalition with its political wing, the modern Conservative Party.

As with other ideologies, to say it is not our own is not to say there is nothing we can take from it. The free market remains in many circumstances the best way to provide goods and services, just as the state does others without our supposing this means we are socialists. We are pragmatists in this, recognising the faults in extreme adherence to either way, because our first principles are freedom defined not as absence of state interference in the free market, but as “from poverty, ignorance and conformity”.

What has been given as the liberalising of the Conservative Party marks its transition to a wholly economist party, as it involves dropping those remaining old-style conservative aspects that do not fit into economism. A more liberal attitude to homosexuality, for instance, does not affect the wealth or power of the financial establishment. The old attitudes that led to Clause 28 make no sense in an economist party. We can welcome that without supposing it really means that the Conservative Party has converted to liberalism.

An early form of economism was driven into the Conservative Party as Thatcherism, though Margaret Thatcher was not an ideological person. She was guided more by prejudice than thought and much that has since been given her name was retrofitted into it.

Thus it was that the grocer’s daughter presided over an economic movement where the big chains destroyed much of what was left of the small shop-keeping class. The Iron Lady opened the back door to billionaires from Russia and elsewhere buying control of vital assets in our country.

These contradictions can be excused by ignorance. What cannot be excused is the contradiction of an image of supporting reward for hard work with a reality of policies that promoted income through already having wealth rather than through work.

The right-to-buy of council housing was introduced to spread the principle of unearned money through property ownership. The ‘Tell Sid’ privatisation campaigns spread the idea of making money through having insider knowledge and money to throw into gambling on it rather than through true entrepreneurial investment.

FEROCIOUS BATTLE

The attachment of the Conservative Party today to the principle of getting richer by being rich rather than through work can be seen in the ferocious battle it put up against our plans to tax capital gains at the same rate as income.

Having made a fuss about a ‘jobs tax’ in the 2010 election campaign, it showed afterwards that it preferred taxing jobs to taxing the idle rich. Yet this movement towards separating wealth from productive work lies at the heart of the current crisis.

No real wealth is created by selling houses to each other, but this became the driving force of much of our economy. The profound social costs of making a family home unaffordable for most families, and no longer available through the community-owned and rented alternatives, are slowly filtering through. Here

is another contradiction of Thatcherism since, in this way, the party that made much about being in favour of traditional family life destroyed an essential part of it for many who want to live as conventional families.

The power over us of a few very wealthy people is the Leviathan that needs to be tackled, rather than the state as the *Economist* article I mentioned puts it. The article starts with the dubious claim that a higher share of GDP going on public spending means the state has become more powerful. The real story of recent decades is that the state has lost power, ceding it through privatisations and globalisation to big international corporations. Many of the controls that the state had into the 1970s now seem quaint and could never be reintroduced.

Higher state spending comes from such things as the more complex infrastructure of modern society, longer lifespans, and dealing with the consequences of those cut out of a decent life by growing social inequalities. Opening more NHS geriatric wards, for example, does not mean the state in general has become more powerful.

Much of what is lauded as “radical” by the *Economist* is the product of minds obsessed with the economism ideology but with little connection to real life outside millionaires’ row. A good example is ‘free schools’. The products of private school education may suppose state schools are under the dictation of left-wing councillors in dungarees. Those of us who are councillors know that local education authorities have little say in what goes on inside schools.

Schools are already substantially run by parents through governing bodies. Any uniformity comes from the national curriculum, introduced not by socialists but by Mrs Thatcher’s government. There are plenty of reforms possible here to improve choice and diversity in education that would be far cheaper and more effective. Far from state schools lacking competitive drive, their dedication to improving SATs figures by trickery rather than real education, in order to rise in the borough league tables, suggests there is too much of it in an unhealthy form.

Seeing the policy wonks and PR men listed as political advisers to leading government members, I despair that none of them seems to have the connection with the life of ordinary people and wisdom accumulated through experience that might help the development of decent workable policies.

Our leaders, Nick Clegg included, seem to prefer advisers who tell them how to sell rubbish rather than how to produce quality products that meet people’s needs. I suppose that is what ‘entrepreneurialism’ now means: the triumph of salesmen with a competitive urge, which drives quality down, not up.

Matthew Huntbach joined the Liberal Party in 1978. He is a former leader of the Liberal Democrat opposition in Lewisham

IGNORE THE COALITION, DO THE REAL WORK

Jonathan Hunt says the task for activists is to assemble a radical platform to ensure a Lib Dem victory in 2015

When the last great coalition government in Britain came to an end, it was the junior partner that went on to win the subsequent general election. Clement Atlee's 1945 Labour Party swept the country with a manifesto for revolutionary reform unequalled since the 1906 Liberal government.

This precedent offers both hope and instruction for Liberal Democrats today. Labour looked ahead, building an election platform for the future, rather than crow about its me-too minor role as part of a successful alliance.

While the reasons for wartime coalition were different from our present shared administration, it is the outcome that matters. And that outcome was based on a party that used its period of non-combative politics to create a programme for government still largely in place sixty years later. We must do the same.

Those members who like to suck up to the leaders can undergo a testing time as coalition cheerleaders. The rest of us have more important work to do. The role of the party over the next four years must be to create a challenging and radical set of policies designed to set the political agenda until the mid-21st century.

And appeal, firstly, to an electorate tired of five years of enforced austerity and increasing misery, after not so much a double dip as a triple tumble thanks to George Osborne's fiscal failings, and his ignoring of Vince Cable. Franklin Roosevelt learned in 1937/38 not to take your foot off the gas too soon, or the engine of growth will falter and fade. Osborne will believe he can coast along, tapping the near-empty fuel gauge to fool himself, if no-one else, into thinking the needle shows something still left in the tank.

UNGRATEFUL VOTERS

Whether the coalition succeeds or fails in solving the debt crisis, Britons will demand something more uplifting and challenging. It is our task to provide it. Otherwise the party is doomed. Just saying "please sir, we did our bit," will be of little use. Electorates are rarely grateful. They look ahead, never behind.

Our task starts now by overpowering Cowley Street sycophants, and take back control of our party. And we must make it clear that, while we wish our ministers well, for they have talents and experience we shall need, they are big boys and girls. They know the risks they have taken in joining the collation. If they fail, the party will not automatically let them scamper back to take over again. To quote the invincible Dr Cable, the coalition is "just business".

It is a business we must largely ignore, hold our nose and let them that want to get on and run it. It would be disastrous and frustrating to issue a running

commentary on every move or speech. For it is the business of coalition government to do unpopular and illiberal things.

It is our business to move rapidly on the radical route to a new political revolution, planning policies and strategies for the future.

There is no shortage of people with good ideas in the party or close to it. But there is a dearth of opportunity to bring them forward. Jo Grimond set the party thinking in the 1960s and into the 1970s. The radical Liberal policies that evolved were stolen by the mainstream parties, as an extension of Labour nicking wholesale the ideas of Keynes and Beveridge. In recent years, our policy bank has lost little from Labour larceny.

Let a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred ideas contend, for we hold the key to the progress that Labour, with its innate belief in 'strong' government and authoritarian control, can never emulate. The belief that Liberal Democrats should eventually merge with Labour to create a new force on the centre-left is one we must totally reject.

Our role is nothing less than to replace Labour as the party of the radical non-socialist left.

Labour betrayed and abandoned those it once claimed to represent; the poor, deprived, discriminated against and other victims. Instead, it became the perpetrator of an unfair and unjust society, reversing our civil liberties, bringing back racist stop'n'search powers, issuing ridiculous ASBOs, lying over Iraq and incarcerating innocent citizens without trial for up to three months.

No one who values liberty and our freedoms can contemplate merging with them. There can be no greater reason for a fair voting system than the danger of these authoritarian bully-boys taking power again on a third of the popular vote.

As someone who has for long bored for England by referring to the Lib Dems' three Rs as redistribution, redistribution and redistribution, I was warmed – to about 7°C – by David Cameron's Big Society, and his claims that it represents a huge redistribution of power.

The sentiments are fine. They could lay the foundations of a Liberal society in which people can truly take control of the everyday aspects of their lives. They could result in people coming forward in their millions to join the hundreds of thousands of volunteers who take part in organisations that really make a huge difference to individual needs. The formidable Dame Elisabeth Hoodless, of CSV, says an extended use of volunteers could contribute services worth more than £3bn a year.

But it poses one huge question: Where's the dosh coming from to pay those who recruit, check, assess

and manage volunteers? The bigger the Big Society, the bigger the bill. Successful volunteer projects only work because a paid professional pulls the strings and makes it happen, week in, week out.

They must be paid, even though the amount of the resulting voluntary contributions may be worth many multiples of the organiser's salary. Volunteers can contribute work valued at hundreds of millions above what is already being done by professionals. But it needs investment in people and premises, phones and photocopiers.

Mostly such schemes achieve something extra that the state has not been providing. Too many Tories, if not Cameron himself, see the Big Society as a replacement activity, getting services on the cheap, to allow them to cut taxes yet again for their rich benefactors.

So let us outfield Frank. And start to really think the unthinkable. Voluntary activities are carried out by volunteers. People who do it from choice. People who want to make a greater contribution than just voting and paying taxes.

Which prompts us to ask whether our contribution to society should only be measured in money taken from us by PAYE or self-assessment? Could we also measure it in time and effort as well? It would surely be much more fair and equal if everyone gave the same amount of time and effort according to their abilities.

There would be no shortage of objections. But so long as a time-tax is introduced gradually, for a small number of hours, with paid expenses when incurred and a real sense of appreciation of people's attempts and skills, most of our fellow-citizens would welcome the opportunity. Polls tell us a majority would like to do something, but are put off by a variety of reasons, many of them social or a feeling of modesty; would they be able to offer skills or service of real value?

Exceptions would cover those who do already play an important role in voluntary organisations or the public service. They should be able to count those hours as their contributions. So too could councillors, if their allowances were reduced.

Preferring carrots to stick, I feel most Lib Dems would prefer such a scheme (relying on income tax incentives such as reductions of, say, one or two per cent) to compulsion. But a voluntary income tax has never been known to work, and this is but an alternative. Existing charities or voluntary bodies should administer the scheme, reimbursed by government.

POPULAR OWNERSHIP

The return of what we used to call popular, as against private or public, ownership has been hit by the double whammy suffered by popular mutual bodies such as building and friendly societies. First by the greed-inspired privatisation of what had increasingly become mortgage companies, run by amateur bankers who brought ruin by gambling on sub-primes and the like on an international stage.

Now we find that the Cajas in Spain, Landesbanks in Germany and other mutual banks started by the people for the people are being forced out of business. We must campaign to show that it is not the model of mutuals that is flawed, but the fact that they had fallen into the hands of those who put political, religious or other interests before the people.

Our Co-operative movement is a sad example of Labour politicians subverting a good commercial and democratic organisation for narrow party political purposes.

Like the rich, large corporates are always with us, and will be the main drivers of the economy for many years to come. If we can't stop them, we can do more to control them.

What is needed is what we could call a Campaign for Democratic Capitalism. Over the last sixty years or so, the 80:20 ratio of shareholding has been reversed, with rich individuals giving way to financial institutions or, to be accurate, to us through our pension funds and insurance companies.

How we make capitalism democratic is by empowering members and policy holders of these bodies to decide where their money is invested, and the policies that control those companies. We should be consulted, in principle and within reason, about the broad issues of investment.

Should we stay clear of defence, tobacco, mining, cut-price textiles and other exploitative sectors? Or fill our boots because they are highly profitable? Let the owners of those institutions decide, in proportion to how people vote. Managers may complain that their professional judgments are being ignored. But so are their competitors. It is an even playing field. And on

the whole, over a given period, ethical investments have produced better yields than unethical ones.

"Government can be master of money, but in a free society it is master of very little else," as William Beveridge wisely observed.

There are many other areas where a welcome breath of democratic air can produce a much healthier and wealthier society. Both in our own party, and in for our society. I have only touched on a few areas where we can make a real difference.

Are we really that committed to local authorities as the ideal bodies to run education? Why shouldn't every school become a free school, funded by central government in inverse ratio to parents' incomes? The poorer they are, the substantially better resourced and funded the schools become. Pushy middle-class parents will be moving from posh to poor areas to get in the right catchment area.

Party members possess the talent and creativity to be much more innovative and do far, far better. We have the ability to create a radical programme that enough grateful voters will grasp with outstretched pencils. But do we have the political will?

Jonathan Hunt describes himself as the self-appointed convenor of the embryo LibLeft pressure group. He was several times an unsuccessful parliamentary candidate, and was business and city editor on two national newspapers

EXIT STRATEGY

Dear Liberator,

In 'Screw or be screwed' (Liberator 340), Simon Titley suggests that Liberal Democrat members unhappy with the coalition shouldn't drift off one by one but play a longer game, but offers no particular course of action or picture of what any longer game involves.

Economics isn't just the main area where the Liberal Democrats appear to have rolled over: it is the crucial one besides which others such as Trident are an irrelevance. Either you are a unilateralist and opposed to nuclear weapons on principle or you are part of the mainstream that feels that, with cuts of around 25% threatened, Trident is a white elephant that can only be paid for by drastic cuts elsewhere but is not the crucial issue.

The problem with the coalition doesn't lie with what is in the agreement, which with the exception of support for 'free schools' isn't a major problem, but in what wasn't in the agreement. We appear to have signed up to an alien agenda of shrinking the state, fulfilling the Orange Book supporters' dreams beyond their wildest expectations.

Does anyone seriously believe that, if we hadn't been in coalition, we wouldn't have been howling in anger at the prospect of 25% cuts?

Did those councillors who may have voted for acceptance like Gadarene swine at Birmingham realise that the consequences of 25% cuts would include things like their school building programme?

A considerable proportion of Liberal Democrat members are employed in the public services. What answers does Simon Titley have for them when faced with their jobs under threat, the terms of redundancy reduced and their pensions, which they have contributed to during their working lives, threatened?

Contrary to the misinformation peddled by papers like the Daily Mail, the average pension for local government employees is around £3,000 a year, yet we have some of our leaders trying to play public sector workers off against private sector employees in a form of the old colonial game of divide and rule.

Unless Hutton produces some kind of compromise in his report, then these members are going to question their loyalty. The danger is that we give the appearance of having



abandoned our principles for bums on seats and the chance of a crucial role in history for a few people. We also appear to be regarding the change in policy on cuts that has arguably been forced on us by necessity as a virtue.

For all your comment about remarks from past leaders being uncalled for, Charles Kennedy was perfectly correct to warn of the dangers of being swallowed up by the Tories, as happened in the past with Joseph Chamberlain and later on the National Liberals, although I suspect that the more fanatical Orange Book devotees will have no problem with that future. Adrian Sanders claims (Liberator 340) there is no alternative. There was an alternative of supporting a minority government on an issue-by-issue basis with the prospect blunting the axe. It might have had worse consequences in the long run but it was an option nevertheless. What we need to know is that there is a sticking point, a line beyond which we will not cross and an exit strategy that may well be adopted before five years are up.

Maybe a conflict will come if Alan Milburn recommends radical changes in his report on social mobility, and the cabinet rejects them. Fortunately, some senior MPs are now beginning to wake up. We also need to remind our MPs that they do not only have the electorate to think about, they also need to go through the reselection process.

Andrew Hudson
Walthamstow

HAS OUR TIME COME?

Dear Liberator,

In Liberator these days there is little about the Liberal Party. As a member, I regret this but am neither surprised nor particularly upset. To many of the magazine's readers, the party must seem an overhang from the 1980s and some may not know of its existence.

The view that the Liberals are doomed to slow extinction might have been validated by the events of the general election. Not only did Liberal Party candidates make little impact – with the exception of Steve Radford at Liverpool West Derby – but the party could run candidates only in a derisory number of constituencies.

My immediate thoughts turned to the future. For, after all, a political party exists only to serve its ideals not for its own sake.

Maybe now the John Stuart Mill Institute exists mainly in cyberspace, the party might morph into a think tank. Perhaps there might be an understanding with the Greens. I, myself, help the Greens when there's no Liberal about and, although they do not understand the concept of decentralisation, they are beginning, at least and at last, to give it attention.

Then two things happened. First was the formation of the Tory-Lib Dem coalition, and then the delayed poll at Thirsk and Malton. Despite being ignored by the national media, John Clark got 3.7% there, a distinct improvement on last time.

Now this is not a breakthrough or even the beginnings of a breakthrough but it was a reasonable show for a fifth party and meant that one voter in 26 had made a deliberate and calculated choice to support a party that had no chance of winning. I wondered

why and, as no doubt with others, came up with a possible answer.

Most of *Liberator* 339's Lib Dem contributors gave the coalition guarded welcome. It serves the dual purpose of delivering some Lib Dem policies, especially those espoused by the Orange Book contributors, and blocking the Tory right. And the magazine's Radical Bulletin section points out that former leaders Steel, Ashdown, Kennedy and Campbell are not in a position to criticise co-operation with other parties.

But these are all identified with, or at least have some sympathy with, the social democratic tendency within the Lib Dems. With inevitable continuing debate on government expenditure and the fairness of the tax dispensation, there is – for Liberal Party members – the enticing prospect of widening splits among the Orange Bookers and social democrats within the Lib Dems.

Liberal members realise that purist liberal voices – socially libertarian, economically egalitarian, politically progressive and decentralist – exist in plenty among Lib Dems. But these may be further marginalised among squabbles of the other factions.

And all this might be in the context of both the coalition partners becoming unpopular. Support for the Liberal Democrats seems to have plummeted already. Combined with Labour being seen as an unconstructive and old-fashioned tribal opposition, this could result in the haemorrhaging of votes from the big parties increasing.

So, the Liberals have another, possibly a last chance. I won't be advocating, as I might have done, consideration of our changing our functions or ambitions at our next Assembly. The British electorate might not contain millions of people with self-consciously liberal aspirations but these hopes are there under the surface in substantial quantities. No promises but gradually – and it will be gradually – the Liberal party might find itself more able to recruit these.

Roger Jenking
Oxford



REVIEWS

Broonland: The Last Days of Gordon Brown by Christopher Harvie Verso 2010 £8.99

Those familiar with Dundee-based DC Thomson's comic strip 'The Broons' will recognise the significance of the title of Chris Harvie's latest comment on UK politics. Harvie has again delivered a blockbuster of a book from a cornucopia of a mind. That he was never offered a chair in Scottish politics or history reflects badly on Scotland's universities. That he followed developments so closely and continued to comment lucidly from a self-imposed exile at the University of Tübingen for so many years says much for him.

In 196 fact-packed pages, Harvie demolishes the myth of Gordon Brown's ministerial competence as effectively as Willie Rennie demolished the Labour Party's majority in Brown's neighbouring seat of Dunfermline West in 2006 ("Brown had neglected his Kingdom ... his command of Scotland was exposed as an illusion"). Harvie was always an acute commentator on Scotland, but this focus does not detract from his consideration of Brown's career in a wider UK context. Indeed, he draws a delicious parallel between Brown and Blair in his suggestion that Robert Louis Stevenson had anticipated their joint career in *The Master of Ballantrae*, with Blair cast as James and Brown as Henry Durie.

Broonland's central thesis is that Gordon Brown created the conditions for his own downfall. Like Oedipus, Brown walks into a trap of his own making – or at least one in the design of which, with Blair, he was complicit. "Beneath the trapeze of Brownite economics and the relentless takeover activity of the City, there was no safety net," observes the author: "there was no morality here: no sense of obligation, sympathy or duty."

Laurens Otter
Wellington

SELF-DEFEATING

Dear Liberator,

I understand that the coalition has to stress Labour's impact on the economy in order to cover up for the bankers in a general propaganda exercise. But the whole 'there is no alternative' mythology is unconvincing.

It starts from the statement that we are in the worst economic mess since the one we were in at the end of the war; but since that concedes that the Atlee government inherited a much worse mess, and since if Attlee has pursued economic policies anything like those of the coalition we'd never have got out of that mess, the argument is self-defeating.

Thus, on the basis of a self-disproving argument, people who yesterday professed a quasi-anarchist critique of Labour's 'Thatcherism with an anthropoid face' are now ready to outbid Labour in the Thatcherite stakes, jettisoning – with obscene speed – any green, anti-militarist, anti-racist or anti-capitalist policy the party ever had.

Frankly, *Liberator* doesn't appear to be much better than the party as a whole.



Though claiming to follow his compatriot Adam Smith: “The Old Savant was continually leery of [Smith’s warnings against] ‘luxury and corruption’ and ‘conspiracies of merchants.’” Government responses to real challenges were rhetorical, Harvie opines, “all undertaken ... to gain media coverage, not strategic logic”. The citizen was reduced to a consumer.

Harvie has the advantage of having known his subject since university days and having campaigned with him for devolution. Thus he is able to cut to the quick. Contrary to the ideas Brown expressed in his *Red Paper for Scotland* (1980), he points out, no Scots, Welsh or northern English members served on the monetary policy committee when he “handed to the City” in 1997 the Bank of England. “Did Brown ever address the huge contribution of booze and gambling to the British numbers?” he asks rhetorically: “Yes, and in the affirmative, given New Labour’s 2006 gambling and licensing acts,” he answers, “backing an increase in anti-social activity not encountered on this scale elsewhere in Europe.” Civil society was replaced by retail therapy.

Using a rapier in preference to a claymore, Harvie points to Brown’s choice of Scottish socialist James Maxton as a mentor in his 1998 biography: had he chosen other Scottish socialists such as Tom Johnston or James Wheatley or the Fabian (for which read Liberal) RB Haldane, the author suggests, he might have learned the dangers of

his approach.

There is more in this short work than a short review can do justice to. Harvie’s main weakness is perhaps his belief that the SNP will prove better at social democracy than the Labour Party. The main question to be asked is why Harvie, once a Labour Party member, accepted Alex Salmond’s invitation to join (and become an MSP for) the SNP, rather than follow the admirable Liberal orientation of his parents, which provided the basis for his doctoral thesis on nineteenth century UK politics ‘Lights of Liberalism’. But he answers that too, in a delightfully self-deprecating and thought-provoking way: Salmond invited him.

Graham Watson

The Struggle for Tibet by Wang Lixiong and Tsering Shakya Verso 2009 £8.99

Books on Tibet tend to be very one-sided. Chinese publications justify the ‘liberation’ of a formerly feudal land and highlight the health and human rights horrors of pre-1951 Tibet, while Tibetan exiles stress the destruction and killings that took place during China’s Cultural Revolution and look back nostalgically to an alleged Shangri-la. The truth, as so often, lies somewhere in the middle.

This means that Wang Lixiong and Tsering Shakya’s volume of essays (and one interview) has a particular value. Wang Lixiong

is a writer in the People’s Republic, but shows an understanding of Tibet’s religious and political aspirations that few of his countrymen possess. Similarly, Tsering Shakya, while now being a Tibetan exiled academic in Canada, is far more objective about past and current realities than many of the Tibetans based in India.

The years of the Cultural Revolution were indeed awful, but as this book makes clear, most of the destruction was carried out by ethnic Tibetans (albeit often under Chinese instigation). Subsequently, much has been rebuilt – I have been round the

magnificently restored Potala Palace in Lhasa myself – though only a fraction of the Tibetan population now live as monks and nuns, unlike fifty years ago. Is that necessarily a bad thing? This book should help readers make up their minds.

Jonathan Fryer

Czechoslovakia: The State That Failed by Mary Heimann Yale UP 2009 £25

It’s not often that you become engrossed in a book before you’ve reached the end of the introduction, but the story of Czechoslovakia, or Czecho-Slovakia, is sad enough to script Constipation Street or some equally miserable soap opera. There is a myth, national and popularly shared, that the plucky little Czechs (and Slovaks I suppose) under the leadership of Tomáš Masaryk clawed their way out of Hapsburg tyranny and established a model liberal democracy until they were stabbed in the back by their western allies at Munich, succumbed to Nazi and Communist dictatorship, rebelled in the Prague Spring (with the promise of Socialism with a Human Face, whatever that is), rebelled again with Glasnost, but were unable to hold themselves together and became two separate nations – the Czech and Slovak republics, a triumph of a Europe of the regions.

Mary Heimann goes beyond that story; the founding fathers

of Czechoslovakia deliberately included substantial minorities within their boundaries, notably of Germans, Hungarians, Poles and Ukrainians. They did not treat these people particularly well, along with their substantial Gypsy and Jewish populations, and were as much perpetrators of the events that led up to Munich as they were victims. Following Munich, in varying degrees many collaborated with the Nazis, not only the quasi-fascist Catholic regime under Father Tiso in the then independent Slovakia, the seeds of authoritarianism having taken root across the country.

After the war, more than any other east European country, the Czechs and Slovaks embraced communism. Dubcek actually offered less of a change, but was buoyed along by popular enthusiasm; the Russians struck back and things 'normalised'. On the back of the experiences of the Prague Spring, Czechoslovakia was the most hesitant of the Soviet satellites to embrace Gorbachev's reforms and the last to rebel. Throughout this story, the Czechs had taken a high-handed attitude towards the Slovaks, and both continued to mistreat Gypsies, Jews and other minorities.

Despite the fact that Slovaks have always played important roles on the positive side of Czecho-Slovak history – Dubcek not least – they tend to be portrayed as if there is something dodgy about them, chiefly the exclusivity of their nationalism.

It is, of course, individuals who rise above the grey mass and inspire with their example. At the Oxford Congress of the Liberal International, I found myself with Eduard Kukan, chair of Demokratická únia (Democratic Union), with a major cabinet post as the junior member of the then governing coalition. "You certainly dealt with those Gypsies," he confided approvingly – our xenophobic press had whipped up hostility to Slovakian Gypsies trying to seek asylum here and stuck at Calais. I assured him that there was nothing wrong with them. Kukan now sits with the Christian Democrat group in the European Parliament, which is probably just as well.

Stewart Rayment

The Secrets in Their Eyes [film] directed by Juan José Campanella 2010

Few enough foreign language films get a mainstream release but this Argentinean one got into a few chain cinemas, no doubt because it is a thriller that can be followed with only a little knowledge of the political background.

In 1974, Argentina was ruled, if that is the word, by Isabella Peron, whose sole qualification for the job was being the widow of Colonel Juan Peron, a figure revered and reviled in equal measure.

Her main adviser was an occultist, hyperinflation broke out, guerrillas fought in town and country, death squads of one kind or another stalked the land.

Amid all this, two civilian prosecutors get a lucky break in finding the culprit for a rape and murder, only to find he is soon let out of prison by the police as a reward for providing them with intelligence on guerrillas.

"If we only used good guys, we'd never get anywhere, welcome to the new Argentina," a cynical police chief tells them.

The female chief prosecutor send her male colleague into distant exile for his own safety after the crime culprit turns up as a bodyguard to Peron and exploits the anarchic atmosphere as he tries to kill the prosecutors.

Nearly thirty years later, the male prosecutor decides to write a book about the affair and, with the story proceeding in both the present and flashback, finds that the culprit has after all, in a surprising sense, received life imprisonment.

The film uses the setting of a thriller to show how, in a country where anyone can 'disappear', the potential is great for settling private feuds, for mentally unstable people setting themselves up as judge, jury and executioner and for the forces of law and order to become the worst criminals of all.

Mark Smulian

Pevsner – The Early Life: Germany and Art by Stephen Games Continuum 2010 £20

Games's biography of Nikolaus Pevsner (the first volume even) tells me more about the man than I ever needed to know. His relevance is as an arbiter of taste, particularly architectural taste. His bequest to the nation *The Buildings of England*, the local parts at least, is something every activist should have to hand.

I'm not sure if I knew, or care, that Pevsner was Jewish; I thought of him as a refugee from Nazi tyranny because of his association with the modern movement in art. I also thought he was related to the other two – Antoine Pevsner and Naum Gabo; he wasn't. Games clears up a lot of such misconceptions and many others.

So what do we learn? Pevsner was a snob (nothing new there, but at such a tender age); he wrote naughty schoolboy doggerel in the sixth form (who didn't?). His mother Annie was an Anglophile pacifist and active in the Deutsche Demokratische Partei (DDP), the more right-wing Weimar liberal party. Pevsner was none of these things.

What I found most illuminating in the book are details of the wider German experience, which tell us something of the slide to Nazism. Hitler was not alone in his philistine appreciation of art. The trend towards the 'volksische' was part of a general German soul-searching in the wake of defeat in the First World War. Pevsner may not have appreciated that side of the new politics but, in common with many middle class Germans, even despite his religion, there were aspects of them that Pevsner did find attractive, at least until he found himself on the receiving end of the stick.

Stewart Rayment

Like all cricket lovers, I was shocked to learn of the allegations about match fixing. They reminded me of that sad period during the 1950s when Eastern betting syndicates turned their attentions to British council by-elections. All over the country, candidates stood with the sole intention of losing – and some pretty fruity leaflets were issued as a result.

Things came to a head in a contest at Weston-Super-Mare, where the candidates of all three major parties were clearly doing their best to be defeated. In the event, they were trumped by an Independent Ratepayer, who was given 14 days without the option at the subsequent court case, but at least the authorities were finally compelled to act.

In those days, of course, local by-elections still fell under the aegis of the Marylebone Cricket Club, and at first-rate job they made of it. If they succeed in sorting out this Pakistani no-ball business, then I would be in favour of scrapping the Electoral Commission and putting them back in charge. After all, whom would you rather see entrusted with our democratic system: some faceless bureaucrat or Derek Underwood?

I am sorry to hear that Menzies Campbell has got himself caught up in this “blood diamonds” business in Central Africa – it seems so out of character.

I can only assume that Elspeth put him up to it.

It was against my better judgement when I agreed to review Tony Blair’s *A Journey for the High Leicestershire Radical*, and my doubts were by no means assuaged when I finally plucked up the courage to open the thing. It was not long before I passed it over to the Well-Behaved Orphans to be turned into paper darts. (This will not, of course, prevent my reviewing it).

One paragraph I did read caused me no little worry. In it, Blair reported that the animosity of his Chancellor was so great that it led him to have “a stiff whisky or G&T before dinner, and a couple of glasses of wine or even half a bottle with it”.

Really, if a man is off his drink to that extent, he is clearly in poor health and unfit to hold a great office of state. I think the Queen should have Said Something.

The discerning reader – and I like to think that all my readers fall into that category – will have noticed that, of late, I have eschewed my customary format as a diarist. These days, rather than label the entries Monday, Tuesday and so forth, I simply (as we used to say at Rutstock) “let it all hang out”.

My thinking is this: some days are simply not terribly interesting. Today is a good example: after fielding a phone call from Clegg in Afghanistan (“Say we are turning the corner,” I told him. “Of course we are not, but that is what our politicians always tell people when they go over there”). I attended to an emergency on the Bonkers Hall Estate Railway. This is not, of course, the standard gauge branch that runs from Market Harborough, but the narrow gauge system that carries crops, fertiliser and stray Orphans about the old demesne. In all honesty, it has rather a variable gauge and that, I suspect, is what was behind today’s derailment.

Lord Bonkers’ Diary

By the time The First Lady Bonkers had been set to rights, it was time to have my bath drawn and then attend a performance of Bellini’s *Norman Baker* at the Royal Opera House, Oakham.

So you see, there was simply nothing to write about today.

You will by now, I am sure, have bought your new *Liberator* songbook. In my introduction, I mention Liverpool’s important role in popular music and my own visit to its famous Cavern Club.

I fear, however, that I was forced for reasons of space to omit a rather shameful detail. You see, I misheard the location of that club and wasted two days looking for it in Hartlepool before I realised my mistake. In my defence, I have to say that I thought it sounded unlikely even at the time.

The moral of this story is that it is a false economy not to have your ear trumpet serviced regularly.

I hate to say it, but I fear that being elected Deputy Leader of the Liberal Democrats has gone to the head of my old friend the Revd Hughes. Not a day goes past without his issuing a statement saying the party will not stand for this or will not stand for that. Now, I am the first to admit that he is the Soundest of Liberals, but since when did being Deputy Leader make one such a big cheese?

It happens that I was once myself elected as Deputy Leader of the Liberal Party and did not find out about it until a good two years afterwards. Even when I did learn of my rank, I did not go around telling Baldwin to watch his step or Ramsay MacDonald to pull his socks up.

Nobody, I had to remind the Revd Hughes after Divine Service the other day, likes a swank. The time may well have come, I judge, for our Deputy Leader to be elected by the party as a whole and not just our MPs – stout men and, indeed, women as they all are.

That said, I should undoubtedly have put my X next to the Revd Hughes rather than that of that Farron fellow from the Lakes who is, by all accounts, a great admirer of C.S. Lewis. Well, it happens that I knew Lewis, and I always found him Distinctly Odd.

Anyway, I know Farron’s sort: let him into St Asquith’s and in no time he would have sold the pews for firewood, painted over the mural of Nancy Seear Defending her Honour Against the Invading Socialists and got us singing “Shine, Jesus, Shine” while he plays the guitar.

Well, we don’t like That Sort of Thing here in Rutland.

I met a member of Liberals Against Choice in Westminster the other day. He thrust a leaflet advertising the group’s fringe meeting into my hand, saying proudly: “We’ve got a civil servant coming.” “What is he talking about?” I replied cagily. “Some of these fellows can be awfully dull.” “Oh he’s not talking,” came the reply. “He’s just going to stand there so we can look at someone who works for the state. I am hoping I can have my photograph taken with him!”

At this point I hailed a taxi, ejected its fare and made my escape.

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