

LIBERALISM WORKS

Why are Liberals always apologising for being Liberal? There was never a better time for Liberals to climb down off the fence and take pride in their values, argues Simon Titley

Confused by the current international crisis? Not sure where you stand? Try this Taliban questionnaire:

Have you done any of the following recently:

- played or listened to music;
- taken a photo of any person;
- openly expressed a point of view;
- (if female) gone to work or to college;
- (if male) shaved or trimmed your beard;
- practiced any religion other than a specific Sunni form of Islam;
- drunk alcohol or eaten a bacon sandwich;
- had gay sex;
- had sex outside marriage;
- had sex outside someone else's marriage?

Score 1 point for each "yes", and 0 points for each "no". If you scored 1 to 10 points, you will be arrested, tortured, imprisoned and possibly executed (if you scored 0 points, maybe you should just get out more often).

Just think about the Taliban for one moment and what it stands for. Doing so forces you to recalibrate your politics. Whatever you may think about New Labour, the Tories, the Americans, at least we inhabit roughly the same moral universe. We're agreed that civilisation is worth having. We're agreed that people should enjoy freedom and prosperity. We disagree about how to achieve those things but we tend to express our differences through political means and we tolerate the right of each other to exist. But the Taliban and the al-Qaida network exist right outside our moral framework.

Those of you who see some sort of moral equivalence between Osama bin Laden and the USA need a reality check. Bin Laden and his allies stand for the exact opposite of Liberalism. They are hostile to democracy, pluralism, free speech, religious and sexual freedom, education, the arts and science. They are not open to negotiation or persuasion. They pursue their worldview through nihilism. Given half a chance, they would wipe us out. They cannot be excused because they inhabit a 'different culture'. They are not a valid option.

Liberals are pluralists but 'pluralism' implies mutual tolerance. Note that word 'mutual'. We cannot afford to

tolerate groups, whether Nazis or al-Qaida, who present a mortal threat.

And here's something else Liberals cannot afford to do. Sit on the fence. We have the best political philosophy in the world, so why don't we shout about it? Yes, haven't you noticed? Liberalism actually works. The more freedom and enlightenment you have, the more likely it is you will lead a happy, healthy and prosperous life. Still not sure? Have you seen any happy, healthy, prosperous dictatorships lately?

My guess is that such brazen political pride will have shocked the "yes, but" brigade among you. If so, the problem is your moral relativism and lack of confidence.

Liberals are often pilloried as timid and petty-minded. We sit on the fence and wring our hands. When we rebel, it is through self-indulgent individualism (for example, calling ourselves 'Jedi Knights' on the census forms) rather than confronting what matters.

We have only ourselves to blame for acquiring this reputation. Why are Liberals so embarrassed? Why do we lack the courage of our convictions? One of the main reasons is our faith that everyone is reasonable like us. All we have to do is sit round the table and eventually we can reach agreement. If only that were so. In fact there will always be many people, probably a majority, who are not Liberals, who will never be Liberals, and whom we must confront. Beyond that, however, are groups so violent in their hostility that to tolerate their behaviour is to invite our own demise.

A second factor that weakened our resolve is our acquisition of a social democratic reflex. The collapse of the social democratic consensus in the 1970s and the rise of Margaret Thatcher left Liberals (like everyone else on the centre and left of British politics) floundering round. Lacking the courage of our convictions and with no idea what to do next, we instinctively defended anything that Thatcher sought to reform or destroy. We have retained this reflex to this day and this has put Liberals in an absurd position. For example, a bold Liberal analysis would see the failure of the health and education systems as an inevitable consequence of erecting centralised state bureaucracies. Instead of standing up to the vested interests, however, we line up behind the professions and defend things that are both illiberal and inefficient.

The third factor undermining our self-confidence is moral relativism. It is impossible to underestimate the damage that moral relativism has done to the Liberal cause. We tie ourselves in knots attempting to be 'politically correct' to every possible minority, while at the same time we tolerate black rap singers who advocate the murder of gays or beating up their "bitches". We tolerate female genital mutilation in Africa (after all, it's "their culture"), but we fume if the local newsagent addresses us as "love". And after the events of September 11th, there was no shortage of commentators offering extenuating circumstances for this atrocity.

Moral relativism has corrupted Liberals. It has sapped our strength and distorted our moral compass. It has led us to defend any old codswallop, as long as it is espoused by anyone who isn't a white male. If we express the universality of any of our values, we are charged with 'liberal imperialism'. We are even told that something as fundamental as political freedom should be subordinate to 'respect' for other cultures. This notion is an insult to those people, such as the Afghans, who are forced to live under dictatorial or theocratic regimes.

September 11th caused a lot of people to take stock and there is good reason for Liberals to do likewise. We are especially vulnerable because the threat of terrorism and the so-called 'war' are being used as pretexts to limit our freedoms. They create circumstances that make it more difficult to defend liberty.

Liberals need to renew their identity and become more assertive. There is a need for 'hard liberalism', bold and uncompromising, which celebrates the success of Liberal values and makes a vigorous case in the face of both terrorism and ill-judged counter-measures.

We need to take a leaf out of the book of successful corporations and their branding strategies. A successful brand does not try to be all things to all people. The first steps to building a successful brand are to establish some core values, some objectives and a target audience. Our 'key messages' (to borrow the PR parlance), if they are to work, may repel as many people as they attract.

An example of this is the Liberal Democrats' back-peddling on the issue of Europe. The overriding concern of the party has been to avoid upsetting Eurosceptic voters and the right-wing press. The party's support is under 20%. The percentage of voters who are pro-European remains some 35 to 40%. It is a minority,

but a substantially larger one than the people who vote Liberal Democrat. A robust assertion of European values is what the party needs. What it gets is a pusillanimous posture intended not to cause offence, but which lets down pro-European voters who have nowhere else to turn.

Stiffening of the Liberal backbone requires leadership, from the Parliamentary Party in general and the Party Leader in particular. But what do we get? On two issues that should have been a Liberal touchstone, the RIP Bill and ID cards, our MPs let us down.

We still categorise our MPs as 'left' or 'right' based on dimly remembered battles of the 1960s Young Liberal 'Red Guard' era. But when it's Simon Hughes who equivocates on the RIP Bill and Lord McNally who comes to the rescue, it is time perhaps to reassess who the true 'defenders of the faith' really are.

It's not just on civil liberties issues where Liberal Democrat MPs lack balls. The failure of the leadership to exploit the Tories' disarray over the summer betrayed a complete lack of confidence and was a tragically wasted opportunity. When our MPs do speak out, time and again they offer essentially technocratic solutions to political problems. They are products of their age, adopting an approach to politics that combines 1980s managerialism with their own experience of council casework.

The Liberal Democrats are coming to an electoral impasse. They are reaching the limits of what local electioneering can achieve, and they have no clear strategy for raising their game above the merely tactical. A strategic approach would build our electoral appeal by standing up for what we believe in.

We defeat terrorism by continuing to do all the things the Taliban don't like - playing music, arguing, shaving our beards and eating bacon sandwiches. And we promote Liberalism by celebrating these liberties out loud. Terrorism tends to be the product of illiberal societies, where all avenues of legitimate expression or dissent have been closed off. Liberalism offers a better way and a better life. We're right, they're wrong, and we should not be ashamed to say so.

The current crisis has created pressure to sacrifice freedoms. Now was never a harder time to be a Liberal. But now was never a better time. What is our leadership waiting for?