

# NEW RADICALISM OR OLD HAT?

January's 'Radical Winter School' in Leeds prompts several questions that the participants might not find comfortable, argues Simon Titley

In the Marx Brothers film 'Horse Feathers', Groucho sings "Whatever it is, I'm against it." For too long, self-styled 'radicals' have been singing a similar tune. The only causes that seem to get them excited are internal party constitutional issues. It is no longer clear what 'radicalism' is meant to be or what it is for.

The New Radicalism movement's initiative, the 'Radical Winter School' in Leeds (described by James Graham in *Liberator* 277), is therefore very welcome. Any spontaneous debate should be applauded in a party so bereft of fresh thinking. But this meeting's first task must be to restore some clarity.

The modern history of Liberal radicalism can be traced back to the 1960s, when the Young Liberals emerged as a radical force. Young people throughout the West were in revolt, ostensibly about Vietnam and apartheid. Behind these issues was dissatisfaction with traditional power structures and the prevailing sexually repressive morality.

Sixties radicals belonged to the post-war 'baby boom' generation. They were the first generation able to take advantage of the expansion of higher education and the last to graduate before the 1973 oil crisis. With minds expanded by education (and other substances) and no worries about finding work, they were free to take up the plight of others.

At least that was the theory. When I was a student in the late 1970s, my university hall warden explained that actually it had all been about sex. Once universities abolished their late night curfew rules and students were free to sleep with one another, he argued, student protest largely fizzled out.

In the 1970s, Liberal radicals shifted their attention to advancing the cause of community politics in the party. Community politics is such orthodoxy now that it is easy to forget how this had to be fought for. Until the early eighties, most constituency parties (where they existed) did little more than hold cheese-and-wine evenings or run jumble sales.

Victory in this battle was a double-edged sword. It revitalised the party as a campaigning force but absorbed radical energy into handling local casework. The few radicals left with any spare time concentrated on opposition to pacts, deals and mergers. While often necessary, this internal focus heralded a descent into oppositionism.

'Radicalism' has to be more than whatever Donnachadh McCarthy happens to be doing this week. The dictionary definition of 'radical' is 'fundamental',

'far-reaching', 'thorough', 'going to the root'. Radicals, then, presumably differ from common-or-garden Liberals in that they do not believe in tinkering at the edges. They believe problems are deep-rooted and that fundamental reform is needed.

But radicals also have the same responsibilities as any other politicians, to address real concerns and produce outcomes that improve the quality of life. They have no special dispensation to masturbate.

Does the Radical Winter School promise a coherent vision of fundamental change? New Radicalism's list of five 'tenets' (as quoted in James Graham's article) is a profoundly disappointing shopping list. The dominant flavour is seventies-vintage muesli and bean sprout politics, which fails to address the current political, economic or social reality.

I am all for 'A Radical Agenda for a Radical Century', but this isn't it. The five tenets, far from being 'radical', have a disturbing whiff of resistance to modernity and a vague longing for some sort of rural communal idyll. Each one is a ringing declaration, with no indication of how it might be achieved.

The risk is that this Winter School becomes what Americans call a 'circle jerk'. The specific dangers are a focus on internal issues, a striving for purity and dogma, and what Lenin called 'infantile leftism'. If this happens, the outcome will be a ragbag of postures.

The first thing radicals must do is to understand the difference between values and policies. Our values are first order priorities, fundamental principles with two characteristics; they are timeless and non-negotiable. Policies are second order priorities; they change with the times and the issues, and are negotiable. The argument is whether they are in line with our values and whether they are sufficiently thorough.

I assume that radicals share the same values as other Liberals. Where they differ is a question of interpretation, consistency and thoroughness. The results of applying a radical critique will be unpalatable for many. Have the 'New Radicals' the stomach for a truly radical policy or party strategy? Do they have a positive vision rather than merely a desire to spite the party 'establishment'?

Another way of examining radicalism is to ask why the majority of Liberal Democrats are not radical. There are three possible explanations:

- They are broadly satisfied with the way things are and see no need for radical change.
- They believe in radical change but are afraid of saying so for fear of getting a hostile press and losing votes.
- They have no vision or values, only an obsession with micro issues or campaign mechanics.

Smug, cowardly, stupid - or just wet. What are we going to do about it? Here's my alternative radical agenda:

- The middle classes - The greatest barrier to radical change is self-interest. You can call it "the breakdown of civil society", or "the global rich-poor divide", or "public services", or "ecology", but it all boils down to one thing. The middle classes want something for nothing and don't really care about the consequences of their behaviour for the environment or the third world. The unspoken central dilemma for democratically-elected politicians is how to do what is right without losing the votes of the affluent majority. Most Liberal Democrats share a mainstream fear of upsetting 'middle England'. They prefer to take the easy populist route rather than confront selfish and unreasonable behaviour. Are you prepared to tell people to use their cars less or to stop complaining about refugees?
- The individual and society - Liberals believe in the primacy of the individual. Have we been cursed by getting what we wished for? Society is atomising, social bonds are weakening and people increasingly inhabit private worlds. Society can only function when there is a shared morality, but what now is the source of that morality? Moral relativism has left politicians and other leaders afraid to say something is 'right' or 'wrong' (that's "imposing your values") or 'good' or 'bad' (that's being "judgemental"). Are you prepared to stick your neck out and make moral judgements, even though that will offend relativists and people with a different moral view?
- Community Politics - Thirty years ago, radicals envisaged community politics as a means of empowering people. Today, it is little more than a local electioneering technique. It burns out our activists and creates a focus on micro issues. Far from empowering people, it increases their dependency. What was once a radical strategy has degenerated into a dogma that no one dares challenge. Are you prepared to tell the Liberal Democrats they're going nowhere fast and need a new strategy?

If the Radical Winter School is to be more than a talking shop, it should agree some practical steps to accomplish its goals, before everyone goes off to the pub. And this does not just mean agreeing a slate of candidates for the next round of party elections.

**Step 1** - Radicals should demand clear goals for the Liberal Democrats. Poverty of ambition is a problem from top to bottom in the party. It was evident from the beginning of Charles Kennedy's leadership campaign that he wanted the leadership but had no idea why. His silence over the summer was embarrassing. Radicals should tell him to piss or get off the pot. At local level, most of our council groups have no ambition beyond installing the odd pedestrian crossing here and there. Radicals at local level should be demanding clear goals and championing distinctive policies, while nationally they should conduct a systematic audit to identify and spread best radical practice.

**Step 2** - Radicals should demand an 'MOT' test for Liberal Democrat policies. This means hauling each one into the inspection pit and examining whether it addresses real concerns, whether it is rooted in any coherent values, whether it is intellectually rigorous, whether it expresses a clear vision, whether it offers practical solutions and whether it provides a platform for campaigning and asserting our values more vigorously. This process will radicalise policy formulation. Most policy is incoherent, flatulent and uninspiring - radicals should expose it as such, demolish it systematically, and replace it with something better.

**Step 3** - Radicals should be stimulating debate. There is very little thinking going on in the party. Radicals could have much more impact if they wrote articles for the local press, organised local debates, held online discussions, or campaigned on specific profile-raising issues.

**Step 4** - Radicals should oppose Liberal Democrats such as Mark Oaten MP who argue that the party should position itself to the right of Labour. To the right of David Blunkett and Jack Straw? It's nonsense, both intellectually and electorally, but who is challenging it? Radicals should be leading the counter-argument and establishing an alternative national strategy.

**Step 5** - To achieve steps 1 to 4, we need practical tool-kits to help radicals do these things and a website to share news and ideas.

The debate in Leeds will be valid only if it produces some firm commitments for action. Please, not another wankfest, no more 'declarations' or 'tenets', no more endless refining of abstract postures. This is not a battle for new convictions, but rather about persuading Liberals to have the courage of their existing ones.

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More information on the Radical Winter School can be found at this website: <http://www.leeds-first.co.uk/radical>