

# 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.

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