

GLITTERING GENERALITIES

Voters who hear Nick Clegg's 'Alarm Clock Britain' are likely to hit the snooze button, warns Simon Titley

Not sure of Liberal Democrat strategy? Don't know which demographic the party should pitch at, in this confusing, post-tuition fees debacle era? Nick Clegg has come up with the answer: 'Alarm Clock Britain'.

In an article in *The Sun* (11 January), Clegg wrote: "There are millions of people in Alarm Clock Britain. People, like *Sun* readers, who have to get up every morning and work hard to get on in life. People who want their kids to get ahead."

In case that sounded too vague, Clegg elaborated: "People who don't want to rely on state handouts. People who don't need politicians to tell them what to think or how to live their lives. People who are not poor but struggle to stay out of the red. They are the backbone of Britain."

It is almost beyond parody. Almost, but not quite.

It's more a case of life imitating art. Clegg's assertion echoed the 'British common sense' of Al Murray's pub landlord: "Down-to-earth, normal, hard working, honest, sensible, normal, law abiding, taxpaying (ish), normal, hard working, honourable, decent, reasonable people."

And it's not particularly original. 'Alarm Clock Britain' mirrors the phrase used by Nicolas Sarkozy in the 2007 French presidential election, when he lauded "the France that gets up in the morning".

Despite Al Murray's prescience, 'Alarm Clock Britain' was still a gift to satirists. Following the publication of Clegg's *Sun* article, two leading satirical columnists stuck the boot in.

David Mitchell (*Observer*, 16 January) speculated how the idea came about. "A keen aide, annoyed by having to get up so early to recover public respect for his master, suddenly sees that very annoyance as something that might unify everyone the coalition hopes to appeal to. Decent people like him. People who have to get up in the morning. But don't want to. But know they must.

"Not people who put their alarm clocks on snooze, the scum! Or maybe, yes, people who put their alarm clocks on snooze once – who doesn't do that? We're all human – but absolutely not the scroungers who put their alarm clocks on snooze twice. Parasites! Unpunctual layabout benefit cheats!"

Mitchell concluded that "this kind of approach – Clegg appealing to 'alarm clock Britain', Miliband to 'the squeezed middle' or any politician to 'hard-working families' – is maddening because it's inane. These terms are meaningless. It's trying to classify people according to their own estimation of their contribution to society. 'Do you sometimes feel exhausted and conscientious?' Yes, almost everyone does, including dyed-in-the-wool slackers and hypochondriacs."

Clegg had also written in his *Sun* article, "Now more than ever, politicians have to be clear who they are standing up for. Be in no doubt, I am clear about who that is."

To which the satirist Charlie Brooker (*Guardian*, 17 January) retorted: "Who? Ethnic minorities? The poor? The disabled? The original lineup of Gerry and the Pacemakers? Beekeepers? Milkmen? Necrophiles? Yeomen? No. They can all piss off. Because Cleggsy Bear has someone else in mind. But despite claiming to be "clear about who that is", it's a group he defines in the vaguest, most frustrating terms possible – almost as if he doesn't really know what the hell he's going on about."

Brooker concludes that, "Basically, Alarm Clock Britain consists of people who use alarm clocks. That counts me out, because I wake each morning to the sound of my own despairing screams. Which I guess makes me part of Scream Wake Britain – a demographic Clegg has chosen to ignore. There are millions of people in Scream Wake Britain, and approximately half of them voted for him."

Brooker also notes the loss of one other key demographic. "Alarm Clock Britain is [not] an amorphous group with no boundaries whatsoever. Students, for instance, are notorious for waking up late, so they're definitely excluded, which is just as well since the average student trusts Clegg about as much as I'd trust a hammock made of gas."

DOG WHISTLE

We could perhaps categorise 'Alarm Clock Britain' as what is known in the trade as a 'dog-whistle' – a coded message that appears to mean one thing to a general audience but has a different or more specific meaning for its target audience.

A more accurate classification of 'Alarm Clock Britain' would be 'glittering generalities', defined by Wikipedia as "emotionally appealing words so closely associated with highly-valued concepts and beliefs that they carry conviction without supporting information or reason. Such highly-valued concepts attract general approval and acclaim. Their appeal is to emotions such as love of country and home, and desire for peace, freedom, glory, and honour. They ask for approval without examination of the reason."

Glittering generalities have two basic qualities. They are vague and they have positive connotations. The pioneer of such phraseology was President Nixon, who in 1969 referred to the 'silent majority', an unspecified category of people who (unlike the anti-Vietnam war protestors of the time) did not express their views publicly.

More recently, the slogan 'hard-working families' was the cliché of the 2005 British general election, with politicians of all parties laying claim to it. It had all the hallmarks of a glittering generality; positive connotations while being sufficiently vague to mean different things to different people. Politicians using this phrase intended that all their listeners would perceive it was referring to them.

Following Nick Clegg's election as party leader,

he and Danny Alexander produced numerous variations on this dismal formula: ‘hard-pressed families’, ‘struggling families’, ‘ordinary families’ and ‘modern families’. No one knows what any of these phrases really mean and, in any case, they are so devalued by overuse that it is unlikely they do any good.

Why do politicians resort to such risible slogans? Obviously, they want to get re-elected so they want to be everybody’s friend. But there’s more to it than that. Voting in Britain used to be strongly class-consonant; if you were middle class, you were likely to vote Tory, and if working class, Labour. Most politicians could therefore make a simple appeal to class loyalty if they wanted to appear to be on your side.

But this sort of voting behaviour has been in steady decline since the 1960s. Increasingly, people look at politics from the standpoint of an individualised consumer rather than membership of a large, traditional bloc. This presents politicians with a problem; they now need to make targeted appeals to individual voters but can do so only through techniques such as tailored letters or e-mails. They cannot do so through the mass media, which is where most voters still get their information. Glittering generalities are an attempt to get round this problem.

There’s another significant reason. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 marked the alleged ‘end of history’. With the defeat of socialism, it was assumed that all the basic ideological questions had been settled for good. My article in *Liberator* 338 (available on *Liberator’s* website) explored in more detail why this assumption has had such a toxic effect on democratic politics, but the main problem is that politicians stopped competing with one another on ideological grounds and started competing with one another to agree with public opinion. Politics was drained of content and politicians resorted to the techniques of marketing and advertising, in particular polls and focus groups. Instead of identifying and rallying different groups of voters, politicians converged on the same territory, the so-called ‘centre ground’. In British politics, this meant a competition to appeal to ‘Middle England’, another glittering generality that no one has ever been able to explain satisfactorily.

In *Liberator’s* 2007 leadership election hustings (*Liberator* 322), both candidates were asked whether they agreed with this approach. Nick Clegg replied, “No. I’ve spoken out against this sort of ‘sat-nav’ politics. Turn this way to shore up the core vote, that way for the floating vote. Go left for the approval of the *Mirror*, right for the *Sun*. This is the politics of cynics for whom tactical ‘positioning’ is all – a hollow, gutless politics stripped of all meaning.”

Clegg seems to have fewer qualms about relying on his sat-nav now.

The ‘centre ground’ is a chimera. It is a statistical average that does not reflect the wide variety of interests and values people hold. In my article in *Liberator* 322, I explained why a ‘middle ground’ strategy is doomed to failure: “Public opinion is not monolithic. The average is not necessarily typical or

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normal; the ‘average voter’ has one breast and one testicle. In reality, public opinion varies considerably and it isn’t possible to please everyone.”

In the same article, I argued that, rather than compete with Labour and the Tories for the same

narrow territory, the Liberal Democrats should focus on winning their natural support, which can be found primarily among people who are younger, better educated and more cosmopolitan. I set out a substantial body of evidence for why this is so.

The trouble is, the Liberal Democrats, having rallied a substantial portion of this constituency in recent elections, managed to alienate it spectacularly through the inept handling of the tuition fees issue. Having lost one core vote, presumably ‘Alarm Clock Britain’ is an attempt to find another. But ‘Alarm Clock Britain’ isn’t a meaningful demographic and therefore cannot constitute a target vote.

VACUOUS SLOGAN

Little wonder that ‘Alarm Clock Britain’ has failed to get airborne. No one else is using Clegg’s phrase except to make jokes about it. It’s the sort of vacuous slogan that happens when you surround yourself with advisers who are all marketing and no content.

Still, if it’s any consolation, things have not improved since 1946, when George Orwell wrote his essay *Politics and the English Language*. Orwell criticised bad English among the political writers of the day, identifying two common faults:

“The first is staleness of imagery; the other is lack of precision. The writer either has a meaning and cannot express it, or he inadvertently says something else, or he is almost indifferent as to whether his words mean anything or not. This mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence is the most marked characteristic of modern English prose, and especially of any kind of political writing. As soon as certain topics are raised, the concrete melts into the abstract and no one seems able to think of turns of speech that are not hackneyed: prose consists less and less of *words* chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more and more of *phrases* tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated henhouse.”

‘Alarm Clock Britain’ is a metaphor. Orwell advised that “A newly invented metaphor assists thought by evoking a visual image,” but warned against using “worn-out metaphors which have lost all evocative power and are merely used because they save people the trouble of inventing phrases for themselves.”

‘Alarm Clock Britain’ has the distinction of being a newly invented metaphor that was worn out from the moment it was first written.

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