

ONCE MORE WITH FEELING

Two recent statements of Liberal Democrat values lack a sense of humanity, morality or passion, says Simon Titley

First, the good news: Despite the alleged ‘end of history’ and the hollowing out of politics, not to mention the Liberal Democrats’ notorious parochialism and anti-intellectualism, the party has published not one but two statements of its ideology. Now the bad news: Both documents lack something vital.

What has prompted this flurry of publishing activity? The first document, *Facing the Future*, been prepared by the Liberal Democrats’ Federal Policy Committee for debate at this September’s conference. Its purpose is to identify the priorities for policy development in the next few years and, along the way, it restates the party’s values.

The second publication is *Freedom, Liberty and Fairness: Liberal Democrat Values for the 21st Century*. If the title sounds familiar, it’s because this publication originally appeared in 2002, prepared by a working group chaired by Alan Beith, and was adopted by that September’s party conference. It has been updated (“with minor amendments and additions to reflect the changed political context”) by Michael Meadowcroft, who explains his motives in an article elsewhere in this magazine.

KNACKER’S YARD

As regular readers will know, I have for many years deplored the lack of political thinking within the party. Why, then, am I not celebrating these first shoots of spring? Indeed, why am I looking a gift horse in the mouth, kicking it up the arse and consigning it to the knacker’s yard? Because the party, at heart, doesn’t want to frighten the horses.

I was originally alerted to the problems with *Facing the Future* when David Boyle proposed we jointly write an alternative version that really did “face the future”. He felt that the original document should be looking ahead towards the party’s future policy challenges but wasn’t looking in the right places.

Elsewhere in this issue, Ed Randall criticises *Facing the Future* for being a descriptive paper that dodges some important ideological questions, particularly with regard to the economy. The implications of the recent financial crisis are profound yet the party seems reluctant to do any more than suggest trying to patch things up.

Ed points to an inability to look forwards (“a great failure of political imagination”) and an equal inability to explain (“the absence of any overarching analytical framework or set of political ideas capable of helping party members... make sense of the multiple challenges that Liberal Democrats insist British society must now face up to”).

Once I had read *Facing the Future*, I could see what David and Ed were driving at. It bears the hallmarks of a document written by committee, being rather anodyne and avoiding controversy, at least in terms of the internal politics of the party – it should have been

titled ‘Never Mind the Policy, Feel the Width’. Even so, the influence of social liberals over the draft seems to have been more powerful than that of economic liberals. In microcosm, there is little any social liberal could disagree with. And yet, and yet...

As I ploughed through the document, I felt increasingly dissatisfied. There seemed a failing more fundamental even than those detected by Ed Randall. I wanted to read something that paints a picture of how life could be better with Liberalism. But the whole damn thing is completely abstract. It seems to have been written as an academic exercise. Its sterile language betrays an emotionally detached approach to politics. There is no passion, no feeling and, above all, no sense of the point of life and how politics should serve that point.

I accept that *Facing the Future* is intended for an internal party audience. It is not designed to be a campaigning document but to steer a process of policy development. But that’s no reason to be bland. And it’s no excuse for cognitive dissonance, a complete disconnect between an expression of political purpose and the human needs that justify that purpose.

DESICCATED DOCUMENT

The result is a desiccated document that fails to relate to real life. It lacks moral clarity, tending to survey moral choices rather than make those choices. Each time the document sets out another disinterested menu of options, the thought recurs: “Yes, but what is *your* view?”

And the document rarely relates its aspirations to what the coalition is doing in practice. It keeps begging the question: “You’re in government, why aren’t you *doing* something about it?”

Throughout, it is obvious that *Facing the Future* skirts around the central moral question: what is life about? The document begins with this laudable statement: “Liberal Democrats’ starting point is the flourishing of the individual. The wellbeing and self determination of individual citizens are central to our values” – but it fails to explain why this matters. As the working party that drafted this document apparently has no idea, I will remind them.

Liberalism is essentially about freedom of the individual but that cause has a point. Life is short. Each of us has relatively few years on this planet and, in the short time available, each of us seeks to lead a good life. However, what constitutes a ‘good life’ cannot be prescribed for us by others because each of us has a unique personality. Only *we* can decide what constitutes a good life. But we cannot make those choices unless we have agency, which means the capacity of individuals to make meaningful choices about their lives and to influence the world around them. Hence our political analysis is rooted in an understanding of the distribution of power, our prescription is based on the redistribution of power

– and our enemy is the unwarranted concentration of power, where powerful people monopolise agency for their own selfish ends or deny it to others.

If *Facing the Future* were rooted in an experience of life and had a clearer moral standpoint, the problems identified by Ed Randall would have been less likely to arise.

In particular, there would have been no inhibitions about condemning the sheer moral unacceptability of the neoliberal economic ideology that has got us into the present mess.

As it stands, *Facing the Future* is simply unfit for purpose because it doesn't do what it says on the tin; it is unwilling to face the future. Conference should refer it back, not because the document's heart is not in the right place but because of the lack of moral courage to analyse and confront the most pressing issues, and above all because we must get away from the idea that policy making is an academic exercise divorced from life.

Compared with this failure, how does the updated version of *Freedom, Liberty and Fairness* fare? I'm afraid it's *déjà vu* all over again. Like *Facing the Future*, it contains little with which one could disagree in microcosm. But because it shares that document's arid detachment, it is deeply unsatisfying.

I attach no blame to Michael Meadowcroft. As his article elsewhere in this magazine makes clear, Michael is well aware of the fundamental problems within the Liberal Democrats, in particular a failure to express clear values or to link those values to the party's grassroots campaigning. It is well worth reading his paper for the Scottish Liberal Democrats' recent 'liberal vision' conference (<http://bit.ly/qiFMfS>), in which he "seeks ways of getting from problem to solution and who therefore regards values and policies as key parts of the 'toolkit' which must underpin tactics and strategy."

Michael rightly believes there is a gap in the market for a statement of the party's values and he wanted to fill that gap. He chose to update *Freedom, Liberty and Fairness* because the party has no other comparable publication available to update. But one can't help feeling that Michael has tried to put lipstick on a pig.

During the 1980s, Michael wrote a succession of pamphlets that explored liberal values. It would have been preferable if he had taken his own advice and had the confidence to write something original once more. Let us hope he does so before long.

In the meantime, it is left to David Boyle and me to fill the gap. Our alternative to *Facing the Future* will not be as long as the original but, without the dubious benefits of a censorious committee, it will at least be pithy and opinionated. And with any luck, it will offer a vision sufficiently positive to enthuse some people.

We intend to confront the most pressing issues, even if the Federal Policy Committee won't. We won't be afraid to say that neoliberal economic orthodoxy has been a disaster and must be replaced by a macroeconomic system that starts from the position that people matter. We won't be afraid to challenge

"We must get away from the idea that policy making is an academic exercise divorced from life"

the materialist precepts of a society focused on the acquisition of consumer tat. We won't be afraid to tackle the issue of climate change for fear of what Jeremy Clarkson might say. We won't be afraid to confront vested interests and propose public services that are human scale and capable of reaching out into their surrounding communities. We won't be

afraid to suggest what a real 'localism' would actually mean for society and the economy. We won't be afraid to challenge the party's own shibboleths when it comes to restoring meaning to 'community politics' and the profound implications this would have for the party's campaigning style.

We aim to link liberalism to life as it is lived. After all, what do people actually want? Realistically, they are not demanding a luxury mansion, a Ferrari in the driveway and a supermodel in the bed. They simply want a fulfilling life. Beyond basic material needs such as food, clothing and housing, they want a loving family, friends and community. They want a secure job that pays a decent wage. They want access to education and healthcare. They want a stimulating range of recreational and cultural activities. They want safe streets and a clean environment.

These are reasonable aspirations that should be accessible to all. They are well within society's capacity to provide. The point is not that they are unique to liberalism – most believers in all political ideologies would broadly agree with them. The point is that liberalism is better placed to meet these aspirations because liberals understand the crucial importance of the distribution of power and the need of people for agency – the power to control their lives instead of just accepting what someone else gives them.

Our party may be in government but it has not taken a Trappist vow of silence. Its message should be: "This is what is wrong. This is what we plan to do about it. This is why you will benefit." And this message should be sufficiently clear and powerful to enthuse people – even at the cost of repelling people who disagree.

So, Liberals of the world unite! You have nothing to lose but your fear of causing offence. If that's alright with you.

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'Facing the Future' may be downloaded from the Liberal Democrat website (<http://bit.ly/rse8F3>). 'Freedom, Liberty and Fairness' may be ordered from Michael Meadowcroft at Waterloo Lodge, 72 Waterloo Lane, Leeds, LS13 2JF for £6 including postage (cheques payable to Michael Meadowcroft). The alternative to 'Facing the Future', written by David Boyle and Simon Titley, will be available on Liberator's website (www.liberator.org.uk) from mid-September