

liberator



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COMMENTARY

DO THE RIGHT THING

Incredible as it may now seem, many Liberals and far beyond the ranks of admirers of 'the project', welcomed the arrival of the Blair government in 1997.

This was in part because of a perception that this government was composed of non-liberals, rather than anti-liberals; that it had arrived by a different route at many conclusions that liberals would applaud.

We know better now. Labour's assaults on liberty have been unremitting, from e-mail snooping to the likely imminence of compulsory identity cards.

There has been non-delivery on public services, the cramped and grudging freedom of information legislation, the broken promises on electoral reform and the shabby corruption of favours to Labour donors and cronies.

Sooner or later, these factors were likely to undo the Government's popularity, and given the irrelevance and ineptitude of the Conservatives, it was always possible the Liberal Democrats might profit.

Iraq has proved the lightning conductor for everything about this government that disgusts people who might have been its friends.

It is not possible for a magazine with *Liberator's* frequency to cover the fluid situation in the Middle East, but let us examine what has driven the public opposition to war.

Containment worked. Iraq has been boxed in for 12 years, accidentally allowing de facto independence for the Kurds. Blair paid no attention to Iraq, beyond enforcing the no-fly zones, before President Bush threw his tantrum last year. Blair's friend, former President Clinton, saw no evident need to invade Iraq while in office. What exactly has changed about Iraq's conduct since?

Loathsome as Saddam's regime is, no convincing evidence been produced of links between Iraq and terrorism. Since 1991, Saddam has been a threat to no-one but his unfortunate subjects.

Having made no convincing argument that Iraq posed a threat, and having insulted the public with an 'intelligence dossier' that turned out to be a pack of lies concocted by press officers, Blair switched tack. Confronted by one million demonstrators, he discovered the need to liberate the Iraqi people.

This argument will be used against opponents of war, so it should be answered. Nothing in international law allows Government A to attack and overthrow Government B simply because it disapproves of its internal conduct. A military free-for-all would result.

On Blair's reasoning, the British army should forthwith invade China and Burma and overthrow their

governments. The impossibility of this shows up the dishonesty of his argument.

Blair has turned his back on Europe, and on those who might be his most natural supporters, in order to be the poodle of a president from the extreme right who 'won' with a minority of American voters behind him, courtesy of organised fraud.

What is going on? Blair's real enthusiasm is to fight not Iraq but the Labour Party. By going along with Bush he helps to distance Labour from its semi-pacifist past. When he conspired to reduce European employee rights with Spanish Conservatives and Italian 'post-Fascists' he distanced Labour from its pro-union past. By giving in to every commercial lobby he distances Labour from its anti-business past.

Two phenomena should be noted. The first is that when for the first time in his wretched career Blair tries to lead rather than follow public opinion, he gets one million people on the streets against him. Given his government's record, the public assumes it is being lied to. So much for his communication skills.

The other is that the public has not switched off from politics. It may have switched off from party politics, but that is not the same thing.

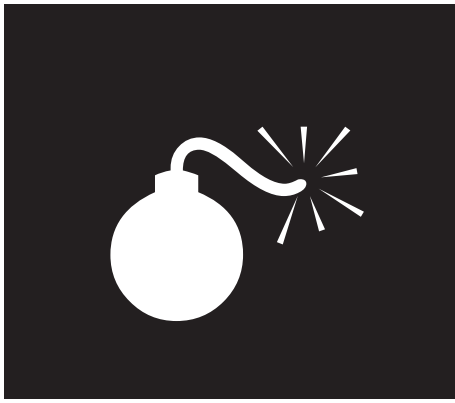
So where do the Liberal Democrats fit in? Professing fealty to the United Nations was all very well last autumn. But the large segments of the party and the public that oppose war with Iraq are obviously not going to accept that 'wrong' is 'right' simply because Bush succeeds in bribing or bullying a majority of the UN Security Council.

A very large part of public opinion is going to oppose this war whatever the UN says, and unless the Liberal Democrats give a voice to that opinion in parliament democratic politics itself will be discredited.

This is not a time for joining with the other two parties in a show of unity. It is a long time since Britain has entered an unpopular war, and the rules are different.

If the Liberal Democrats say, "the UN voted for it, so everything must be OK", they will deserve the backlash from people who have turned to the party for the first time and feel let down. Since that includes large numbers of young people, community activists and ethnic minorities – all groups the party claims to wish to cultivate – the damage will be doubly bad.

But if the party can keep up its criticism of Blair over Iraq it has potentially been handed a way to harness all the other resentments brewing against Labour's incompetence, corruption and innate authoritarianism. This is the sort of chance that comes rarely. Let's not blow it through timidity or muddle.



RADICAL BULLETIN

A RALLYING WHISPER

When Charles Kennedy stood on a bridge to address the ranks of Liberal Democrats at the start of the anti-war march in London, he declared it to be his proudest moment as a Liberal Democrat.

Indeed it was a proud moment, with more than 3,000 people not normally given to joining demonstrations lined-up with placards bearing the somewhat all-purpose slogan 'Lib Dems Say No'.

But it almost did not happen thanks to prevarication by Kennedy and other MPs, and internal obstruction.

Things started when Susan Kramer and James Graham put a motion to the Federal Executive urging all party members to support the march, and for the party's media, campaigning and e-mail resources to be used to this end.

The more naïve type of party member might think that when the FE calls for something, never mind unanimously, it happens. Not a bit of it.

The first most people knew of the FE's decision was a mention at the bottom of Tony Greaves' column in Liberal Democrat News. The paper carried nothing else and although Kennedy circulated an e-mail to party members it made no mention of the march. Nor did the party's website or any other official channel.

Liberator understands that Lord Razzall, chair of the campaigns and communication committee, refused to sanction any resources to implement the FE decision.

Given the unprecedented response to the eventual call for party members to attend, the publicity garnered by Kennedy and the credit the party gained among the anti-war majority of public opinion, this is puzzling.

If Razzall cannot recognise the greatest public campaigning opportunity for years, what others might he miss, even if he did redeem himself somewhat by attending the march?

Worse was to come. The march presented the party with an unusual opportunity to reach out to groups to which it always claims it wants to reach out, but rarely does. These include ethnic minorities, young people and disillusioned Labour voters.

So where were the recruitment leaflets to hand out to marchers? The campaigns department refused to pay for these. Those that did appear were created by LDYS and FE vice-chair Donnachadh McCarthy, for most of the time the only party officer prepared to do anything practical to give effect to the FE's motion, and were paid for by private donations.

Meanwhile, Liberal Democrat News was pathetic. The most momentous FE decision in years was

ignored on the grounds that the mention in the Greaves column was sufficient.

The 31 January issue carried nothing but a letter from Women Liberal Democrats urging support for the march. The 7 February issue managed scarcely 100 words, though admittedly at the bottom of the front page, urging people to attend and join at the rallying point, but with no contact details for further information. By contrast, it found space for a huge picture of Alan Beith with former MP Elizabeth Shields and a blow-by-blow account of Edinburgh South's Burns night celebrations.

It did promise "more information next week". That was hardly much use as 'next week' was the day prior to the march.

In a report to FE members, McCarthy noted: "I am disturbed however by a communication from the Chief Executive which seems to indicate that the Campaigns Department thinks that Lib Dem News should carry no formal notice/ specific article re [garding] the FE's request."

LDN was not the only publication in a flap about publicising the march. Liberator Collective member Stewart Rayment also produces interLib, the newsletter of the Liberal International British Group.

Since Iraq in an international issue, on which the Liberal Democrat leader and FE had something important to say, he included the motion in the newsletter.

Three times he submitted it to LIBG and three times it vanished amid an exotic variety of excuses about e-mail failures. He did not bother to try a fourth time, not least because the march has taken place.

Meanwhile, there was still nothing on the website and the press office refused to publicise the FE's decision.

There was however something on the The little known 'extranet', to which four persons from each constituency can have access. This carried an announcement on the FE's motion, president Navnit Dholakia having perversely concluded that this gave sufficient effect the decision.

But even this did not include the FE's decision, and changed the wording from 'encouraging' members to attend the march to 'noting' it.

The press office refused to get involved. When McCarthy enquired why, he was told that it works for the Political Office of the Liberal Democrats not the party. POLD is the body paid for from parliamentary funding, and this sounds like a distinction that will return to haunt to whoever said it.

Things only changed when Kennedy decided to speak at the rally. By then there was only a few days left to mobilise.

The response was impressive. It might have been impressive still, and a more organised campaigning opportunity, had party officers done their jobs properly.

But while all this preparation was not happening, Kennedy had been mulling over whether to speak at the rally.

He had appeared to be waiting for the parliamentary party meeting on the Wednesday before the march to take a decision.

Some MPs were concerned that Kennedy would be attacked in right wing newspapers if he took part. No doubt he would have been, but right wing newspapers are never likely to be very sympathetic to the party.

Matters came to a head with an editorial in the Guardian the previous Saturday (8 February) asking, "Where will Kennedy be?"

Since the answer "he isn't quite sure", would have made him appear absurd, he revealed on Breakfast with Frost the following morning that he would be prepared to speak at the rally. Only after this did the party's communications machine limp into life.

A letter to the Guardian from Tony Greaves later thanked the paper for getting the leader behind the march and followed one from McCarthy highlighting FE support for it.

Kennedy's hesitation appeared to be based on concern about keeping the party together, not associating himself with the "no war in any event" argument and not being seen with the far left fringe.

As it turned out, it was absence, not presence, that would have confined him to a fringe and caused the evaporation of the favourable tide of public opinion he was riding.

There is also some dispute over the interpretation of the FE resolution. Again, more naïve people might have thought that a unanimous resolution to support a march meant what it said. Not in the upper echelons of the Liberal Democrats.

Kennedy appeared to be under the initial impression that the resolution merely congratulated him and Menzies Campbell on their stance and invited the parliamentary party to send an official speaker to the rally.

An e-mail from Kennedy to FE members told them that this is what he thought was agreed, a stance which must have surprised anyone at the meeting.

Just to put things in context, here is the FE's unanimous motion:

The Executive:

- 1. Notes the ongoing Iraq crisis.*
- 2. Supports the line being taken by the Parliamentary Party that there remains no compelling argument for military action to be taken against Iraq at the present time.*
- 3. Praises the work of the Parliamentary team, in particular Charles Kennedy and Menzies Campbell, for their principled and determined stance on this issue which has caught the public mood.*
- 4. Continues to support the policy adopted at Brighton Conference 2002, that the UK should participate in military action only as a last resort; if clear and uncontrovertible evidence emerges to show that Iraq possesses weapons of mass destruction and is*

likely to use them; after a full and intensive debate in Parliament; with an explicit mandate in the form of a UN resolution or in accordance with international law and; if designed as far as possible to avoid civilian casualties.

5. Therefore encourages Liberal Democrat members to voice their concerns about the Iraq situation, in particular by participating in the Stop the War demonstration on Saturday 15 February.

6. Calls on the Party to publicise this fact through the press, the party's email and internet facilities and Liberal Democrat News.

7. Requests that the Parliamentary Party send one of their number to speak at the post-demonstration rally on behalf of the Federal Party.

This meaning of the motion, in particular sections 5 and 6, seems to be quite clear to any reasonable person.

In his report to the FE, McCarthy concluded: "I find the almost complete inability of the headquarters machinery to deliver such simple requests extremely disturbing.

"I am sure that once the national crisis has passed, we will need to return urgently to the serious structural and line-management issues that this situation raises for our effectiveness as a national political party."

* see feature pages 14-15.

LIST OF SHAME

There was a free vote on reform of the House of Lords, but one might have expected that Liberal Democrats would follow party policy in favour of an elected upper house because they actually believed in it as liberals. Not a bit of it.

Asked to back a fully elected house there were votes against from David Chidgey, Brian Cotter, Andrew George, Sandra Gidley, David Laws, Lembit Opik and Bob Russell.

As if that anti-democratic exhibition were not bad enough, George, Laws and Opik also voted against the option to have 80 per cent of the upper house elected.

Since this fell by a mere three votes, the national has this trio to thank for the perpetuation of an undemocratic and unaccountable upper house for the foreseeable future. They certainly have some explaining to do.

Laws is a stalwart supporter of choice in public services, but his attachment to choice does not, it seems, extend to letting the public decide who should sit in the legislature that governs them.

The performance in the House of Lords itself was not much better, though the Liberal Democrats managed the highest percentage turnout and highest proportion in favour of election rather than appointment.

About 35 peers voted steadily for the elected options, though 15 voted for an all appointed house.

However, the Liberal Democrats were the only group in upper house where the chief whip and leader voted the same way and in line with their party's policy.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The new email system in parliament, which blocks supposedly rude words, has been the subject of much mirth. It must make it hard to communicate with constituents in Cockerthorpe, Penistone and Scunthorpe, for example.

But now the curse of the obscenity detectors has hit the blameless Liberal Democrat federal policy committee.

The system kept rejecting its papers. The reason: the address list included Theo Butt Philip. A quick change to 'Theo B-Philip' and problem solved.

WE EVEN CAME ROUND WITH THE OUT CARD

Over enthusiastic telephone canvassers for one candidate told some Liberal Democrat members in London during the Euro candidate list ballot that he was already the capital's MEP for the party.

It was bad enough saying this at all when that position is held by Sarah Ludford, but to phone another candidate and say it looks like carelessness.

The person concerned was sternly told to contact those already called with a correction, and to prevent anyone making this claim on his behalf in future.

And still the objections come in to the electoral rules, in particular the mad one that states that candidates can deliver an 'out' leaflet to party members but only so long as they have knocked on their door first.

This might be reasonable in Westminster selections, but not across entire regions.

Many candidates might be able to organise a delivery round, but particularly in rural areas it is near impossible to organise a personal canvass of individual members. Those in the north west, for example, faced the prospect of having to call on a large number of members scattered across the whole of Westmoreland.

Yet despite this Draconian provision, sitting MEPs were allowed to distribute newsletters to all members in their region merely a few days before ballot papers are circulated.

The whole system seems designed to discourage precisely the campaigning skills a candidate will need in a public election, and to hand an even stronger advantage to incumbents than they enjoy anyway.

One way candidates can communicate with members is where members have agreed to give the party their e-mail address.

This process has shone an intriguing light on how people choose their e-mail addresses.

Step forward those prominent members who choose to go by the sobriquets 'honeybunny', 'newredarmy' and 'sexypants'.

UP FRONT

Guests at one of the soirees held to mark Simon Hughes' 20 years in parliament paused with jaws open as his local party chair Gary Glover revealed one of Hughes' hitherto unknown talents.

One local resident had told him, Glover said, that she enjoyed talking to Simon "because every time I do my breasts get hard".

COMPUTER ERROR

Aghast members of the Federal Finance and Administration Committee are wondering what to do about a new membership computer system, which is late, over budget and causing headaches before it starts, although it is unclear who has brought this about.

Last November the committee appointed sub-group chaired by Duncan Hames to examine the project and

decide on its future direction. It negotiated with supplier ProTech and got a new delivery date of 6 May 2003.

A meeting between the two sides in December saw the Liberal Democrats note that "for any proposed delivery date to have credibility it had to be backed up by a detailed project plan and a report on risks and contingencies".

Just before Christmas the party's IT sub group met and reached the consensus that ProTech "had finally produced the sort of detailed planning document required".

But they were unhappy with the proposed delivery date, which had now become June 2003, and with the possibility that ProTech would further change the staff allocated to the project.

Chief executive Hugh Rickard wrote to ProTech stating that "the Liberal Democrats challenged the June delivery date and regarded the retention of the allocated project staff as a key issue".

In January the IT sub group met again, this time with the delivery date back to 6 May and a commitment from ProTech to keep the existing staff on the project.

The group accepted this plan but noted: "We should point out that the proposed delivery date took out all contingency for delay that would have been available for a first quarter delivery date and that further over-run would have further cost implications for the Liberal Democrats." The party waits with baited breath,

WASTED CHANCE

The election of Menzies Campbell as Liberal Democrat deputy leader is surely an opportunity missed. The post is ill defined and largely what the holder makes of it (Liberator 285).

It therefore ought to be a way to promote someone else among the pitifully small number of active Liberal Democrat politicians with any public profile; a group more or less confined to Charles Kennedy, Campbell, Simon Hughes and Shirley Williams.

Campbell has all the status and profile he could need in his post as foreign affairs and defence spokesperson (which he retains).

Electing his rival Malcolm Bruce would have potentially put another Liberal Democrat in the public eye. But it seems Kennedy has got his wish that his deputy should be someone who above all poses no threat to his job, now or in the future.

SPILLING THE BEANS

Long-standing readers will remember Hugh Jones, the Liberal Party's patrician secretary general more than 20 years ago. Jones, who was always willing to turn a blind eye to Liberator being produced within his headquarters, is poised to publish lid-blowing memoirs.

He has already published one volume of autobiography, dealing with his years as a diplomat mainly in Africa.

Volume 2, which is about to be published, will include his time with the Liberals, according to a flyer he has mailed out.

The book is likely to include not only the Thorpe trial, the Lib-Lab pact and the Alliance, but also perhaps such gems as Roger Pincham's theories of human levitation. Jones was centrally involved in these events and may well have interesting things to say.

SECOND TIME FOR SCOTLAND

With elections due for the Scottish parliament, should the Liberal democrats go for another coalition with Labour, asks Gina Ford

May 1 is polling day for the Scottish Parliament, and all Scotland's councils. Time for voters in Scotland to look back on the first session of our reconvened Parliament and look forward to the next one. One of the 'blessings' of our fixed term Parliament is that the political correspondents have already been in overdrive for months.

Will the electorate turn out this time sufficient numbers to maintain its credibility? Will the ever-spiralling cost of the new Holyrood building put voters off? Will the building ever be finished?

How will the coalition partners fight an election campaign? We already know the answer to this one - a succession of snide comments about the Liberal Democrats, made by Labour MSPs, have been hitting the headlines for the past few months. Councillors all over the country will be familiar with the last question, since administration of local government by coalitions of all conceivable colour combinations has been around for a while now, but it still seems to have plenty of novelty mileage left as far as Parliamentary dealings are concerned.

At the time of great excitement following the first elections in 1999, I was a member of the executive of the Scottish Liberal Democrats, which was asked to consider the partnership agreement with Labour and vote on whether to go along with it. This process was carried out against a backdrop of media pressure for instant results, and was completed in a week. Many of us felt that this was too hurried and were uneasy about whether we had allowed enough time to get the best possible outcome.

This time, in anticipation of the results again requiring a coalition partnership of some kind, the party is setting up a negotiating team. So, if all goes according to expectation and we are offered the chance to join a second coalition executive should we go for it?

On balance I think the answer is yes, but only if the parliamentary party has learnt from the early mistakes last time. The first couple of years of the Parliament saw a Government with Liberal Democrat members in it making things even harder than anyone thought possible for Liberal Democrats in local government.

This was largely because 'our' councils were rural and our partner's urban, and local government allocation in Scotland still heavily favours the latter. In the early days our side of the partnership was regarded as very much less than equal and our ministers the lightweights at the table. I was pleased to read in The

Herald on 28 February that Jim Wallace is already making it clear that he regards our bargaining strength as much more of a force this time and is suggesting that 'a second term on any terms' is not an option.

In fact the evidence of the first term is that it is no longer credible to rubbish our side. The Liberal Democrat ministers' track record is about as good as we could have hoped, despite them having had difficult, if not impossible portfolio issues to contend with. Ross Finnie, was widely acknowledged to have handled Foot and Mouth north of the Border much better than his Westminster counterpart.

Jim Wallace has been acting first minister three times, and has earned nothing but praise on each occasion. In addition to this he has been justice minister, which has put him in the firing line for a huge variety of issues relating to crime levels or prisoner numbers and overcrowding. As justice minister he has delivered a Freedom of Information Act that works for the benefit of the citizens of Scotland and puts to shame to cries from London that we just cannot have this kind of thing here.

Our input to the partnership has already delivered the abolition of up-front fees for Scottish students and free personal care for the elderly in Scotland. Both of these are now being called for south of the border.

The Parliament has proved that a proportional system of central government can work in mainland Britain and that voters could cope with it. It is already clear that delivery of PR for local government in Scotland is a non-negotiable part of any agreement for the next term. We have been spared most of the further erosion of local democracy that has been inflicted on councils in England. We do indeed have a record of action and a promise of more. Life in a partnership Scotland is very much better than if Labour had been unchecked in power.

I think life would be even better if our Parliament had tax-raising powers too, and I hope that pressure will build to bring this about. To really deliver good devolved government in Scotland we need the freedom to set our own agenda financially as well as politically. A modest tax increase to offset the cost of abolished tuition fees and free personal care would make good sense, as both are a valid investment in our society.

Meantime, good community politicians everywhere can take comfort from the fact that a members' bill on dog fouling is working its way through the system and we hope see it become law before long!

LIVING ON BORROWED MONEY

Liberal Democrat shadow chancellor Matthew Taylor sets out in his Alternative Budget where the Government is going wrong

For the fifteenth year in a row, we published an Alternative Budget, laying out what we would do in the Chancellor's place.

The Alternative Budget ensures that we have thought through and costed proposals throughout each Parliament. It shows the electorate that we are serious about preparing for national government. It means we have a coherent critique of the government.

We argued at the time of the 1997 general election that significant increases in spending on public services were necessary to rectify the problems caused by decades of underinvestment. Yet despite the hopes of many, after 1997 the Labour government stuck to Conservative spending plans and so deprived schools and hospitals of much needed investment. In fact, the percentage of national resources devoted to these and other vital public services was actually cut. Unsurprisingly, waiting lists, class sizes, traffic chaos and pensions failed to see the improvements promised by New Labour.

That policy was only reversed towards the end of Labour's first term, in the face of continued pressure from the Liberal Democrats, and as Labour met a worsening crisis in the NHS. Even then, spending during Labour's first term on most public services, including education, was a lower proportion of national income than in the Conservatives' last term.

Truly significant investment was only made available in the 2002 Comprehensive Spending Review – again after sustained Liberal Democrat pressure. It was also only made possible by tax rises that Labour had hidden in its 2001 general election campaign. The Liberal Democrat manifesto was widely acclaimed because it was honest enough to show the exact costs of all our promises and how we would pay for them.

Late as this new investment may be, however, we recognise that it has shifted the political debate. Current plans for increasing public spending in the period up to 2006 involve broadly the same level of tax rises overall to those we proposed in the 2001 general election, so the money available matched that we need for our policies.

But Labour are spending it differently, and raising it differently. Hence we titled the Alternative Budget 'Spending more wisely, taxing more fairly'. It is about guaranteeing that the money available is spent well, on the priorities of the British people. It is also our priority to make sure that choice in public services is expanded, and that people have more local control over

the services they receive. As you would expect, much of the detail was about decentralising and reducing Labour's tendency to meddle in people's lives.

The investment the Government is making is in danger of being wasted. We need to change the top down, over-centralised state in the UK; managing frontline services from Westminster cannot truly reflect local needs and priorities. And we need a change in priorities so that they reflect the needs of citizens, not Whitehall bureaucracy.

Our response to the change in government attitudes is a root and branch review of their spending practices and priorities in the public services. Our priority over the coming year will be to map out our alternative proposals so that the new investment in public services is used to make the changes needed to guarantee first class public services and provide real choice for taxpayers to set their local priorities.

So the Liberal Democrat Alternative Budget sets out the first fruits of our reprioritisation to the people, reallocating misspent funds to transport, schools, pensioners, and others. Our root and branch review of spending practices and priorities in the public services will continue of course through to the next election. Many of the proposals will reprioritise misspent funds to core public services such as education. Others may stop national government doing some things altogether, in the belief they are better done locally –or in some cases (such as subsidising arms exports) not at all.

The first set of changes we proposed were about spending more wisely. There is, for example, a pressing need to fund better public transport and free personal care for the elderly (and others) and we want to see more progress on overseas aid.

A couple of examples will explain this. For transport we used unallocated money in the 'Capital Modernisation Fund', also known as the Chancellor's back pocket. This fund is used to bail out the Chancellor's mates, prop up dodgy government schemes and generally keep Gordon Brown's colleagues on a short lease. Frankly, we believe the railways need it more. Much more.

For free personal care we used part of the extra billions allocated to the NHS this year, on the grounds that free care should be a priority rather than the 35 per cent increase in the central NHS pot. (Strangely a disproportionate chunk of the increase in NHS spending has gone to the budgets directly under Alan Milburn rather than hospitals and other local services!).

Turning to tax, both businesses and ordinary taxpayers are seeing tax rises at present to fund the Government's spending plans. We believe that these funds are indeed necessary for our schools and hospitals. But with the funding secure, and prioritised to our very different plans to invest in change compared to the Government's overcentralised and increasingly unjust policies, Liberal Democrat plans currently require no further increase in tax on ordinary hardworking families and individuals in the UK. As a result of the National Insurance rise coming in this April, basic rate taxpayers are now paying in effect the rate we proposed at the last election, and the money is being provided for the purpose we proposed. We have set the agenda and won the debate.

However, as well as spending changes there are significant tax changes that we do propose in the Alternative Budget. Tax changes that achieve a significantly fairer distribution of the tax burden, and prevent the need for a significant tax injustice proposed by Labour. Under Labour, indirect taxes have gone up, while income tax was cut in 2000 by 1 per cent for all – benefiting the richest most. The result was to cut the tax burden on the rich, and raise it on ordinary working families. The poorest 20 per cent of households, taking all forms of tax into account, now pay 40 per cent of their annual income in tax. The richest 20 per cent of households pay just 35 per cent. In addition, Labour now plan to introduce a new, unfair and iniquitous tax on learning, in the form of top-up fees – burdening students with debts of up to £21,000 after three years study.

We will therefore make two significant changes for ordinary people, funded by raising an extra 10p in the pound once incomes exceed £100,000 a year. This raises £4.5bn in a full year – a staggering amount of money, which reflects the enormous growth in the incomes of the richest people in our society over the last few decades. Of this, £2bn will abolish tuition and top-up fees which are an unfair tax on learning. Higher education, and the choice of an excellent university, will not under the Liberal Democrats be limited to those who can afford it.

The remaining £2.5bn will be used to cut £100 off every council tax bill, reversing rises which have been forced on councils by Government, as a prelude to introducing a fairer system of local taxation, based on ability to pay.

The council tax is hugely regressive, penalising working families and many pensioners. It has been forced up by Conservative and Labour Governments cutting their share of local spending and adding new obligations to local Government. Many people cannot afford this regressive council tax hike. This will be as a first step towards introducing fair local taxation based on income. However that can't be done in one budget, and although it probably wouldn't take much more than a year or two to introduce, this year's Alternative Budget is aimed at making things fairer in the mean time.

Of course, the Alternative Budget also sets out our analysis of the government's failures on the economy. Despite his reputation as a competent Chancellor, there are increasing doubts about Gordon Brown's approach. He presides over an imbalanced economy, and the danger is that imbalanced growth will become no growth. Any British business which competes with the Eurozone is on the edge of a crisis, if it has not already gone bust. We have the deepest manufacturing recession since 1981, and the longest since 1945, with employment in manufacturing down more than half a million since 1997.

Meanwhile, the economy is kept going by increases in government spending and increases in personal borrowing. Neither can go on for ever – Britain needs to earn the money it spends. So the Alternative Budget also sets out our proposals to tackle those problems and put the British economy back on the right track.

Briefly, I commissioned a review in the coming months examining what, if anything, we can do to prevent Britain's housing booms and busts. Second, there will be further work on simplifying the tax system, and cutting red tape following up a number of specific Alternative Budget proposals. Finally we propose to tackle concerns about the accuracy of Gordon Brown's budget forecasts by getting the National Audit Office in to do a fundamental audit in all the dark corners of the Budget, every year.

So that's it. Action to tackle the real economic problems Britain now faces. Tax reforms that mean a significant redistribution from the 1 per cent of super rich in the UK to the other 99 per cent, to cut council tax and end student tuition and top-up fees. And spending more wisely, to guarantee free personal care for the elderly, higher pensions, investment in the railways. Times may have changed, but the Liberal Democrat commitment to change them for the better has not.

IRAQ ON THE RACK

If the US overthrows Saddam Hussein that will be the easy bit. After that Iraq's complex internal issues will come to the fore, says John Hemming

The real challenge in dealing with Iraq is writing today (27 February) expecting some form of invasion between now and when this article is to be read trying to prognosticate the future. However, in for a penny, in for a pound.

It is pretty certain that the US, backed by some others, will invade Iraq.

It is also pretty certain that the UK will be there. As at today Saddam

Hussein is being reported as bringing troops back to Baghdad (note that

20 per cent of the population live in Baghdad and it is about 70 per cent Shi'a). Whether they will fiddle something through the security council is not clear as yet.

One thing that has not been generally reported is that the Ba'ath have forced senior generals to keep their families in Al Mansur and Al Amariya. The official reason is for their safety. The real reason is to prevent the generals moving their families out of Iraq. This means that they are unlikely to arrange a coup because their families are at risk. The form of "triple lock" that Saddam Hussein has arranged with guardians to guard the guardians who guard the guardians (and write reports on them) is designed to prevent coups.

I would be surprised if Saddam Hussein went peacefully. Too many people are after him and his retainers such that without a country to control he would not be safe anywhere in the world. It is the extreme of a gangster regime based around a clan that has a history of abusive behaviour.

The Ba'ath has no chance of defending directly against US forces. If the UK government finds the food, clothing and paint for the UK forces to go in the desert the same may apply, but in essence the UK is part of a multilateral figleaf for the US rather than a real player.

The regular armed forces are desperate to surrender. They are mainly

Shi'a conscripts. The Republican Guard may fight a bit, but if they have a way out they won't.

The Mujahadeen e Khalq (Iranian Opposition) and Palestinian students in Baghdad should worry the US more. They have real sympathy with the regime - not being Iraqi - as it has delivered for them. Nothing has been reported in the media about them being in Baghdad (although they are mentioned elsewhere). Unless they have a way out they, like many in the secret police, will fight to the death.

Tony Blair appears to be looking for a really short sharp 'shock and awe' of a war lasting perhaps 3-4 days before the regime capitulates. I wonder where he gets this from. The theory behind Shock and Awe is analysing techniques for creating a situation in which

your opponents surrender. There are nine different types of proposals in the original book written by Harlan Ullman. The "Hiroshima and Nagasaki" version distinguishes itself by being a particular attack on civilian targets. Like, er is that what they are really supposed to be doing? Then again Clare Short MP did say military action was potentially a good idea if it helped improve the Iraqi economy (Hansard 30/1/03). What a weird world.

Still Tony and his cronies believe that it will only take 3-4 days, a bit like the First World War that was "The Great War to End All Wars" and was to be "over by Christmas".

One thing to recognise about Saddam Hussein and the Ba'ath regime is that the actions of Saddam Hussein are not alien to actions that have happened in Iraq in the past. There are a wide range of ethnic groups and religious sects in Iraq. The only thing that tends to unite them is that historically they have all oppressed someone else, apart perhaps from the Shi'a who have generally been on the receiving end of oppression.

Saddam Hussein's regime may be the worst the world has ever seen (actually worse for the Iraqis than Hitler was for Germans). However, the Kurds have been alleged to have oppressed the Assyrian Christians in recent years. There was even a battle between the Sorani Kurds and the Badinani Kurds in the mid 1990s mainly over customs revenue that were being kept just for the Badinanis. This ethnic division within the Kurds is rarely recognised by people who are not Kurdish. There is, however, a different language and different traditional dress styles. The political parties are the KDP (Badinani) and PUK (Sorani).

The big problem for the USA is that they think that people in Iraq will behave as "rational consumers" within concepts such as the "ideal market". It all comes from a disconnection between different systems of society.

If you take an anthropological perspective there are a number of differences between say Iraq and the USA.

One aspect is whether the system is an open or closed society. Closed societies are those in which the people in control are not readily open to challenge. They tend towards being more corrupt and an individual's fluency in 'arselikhan' is more important than what they can contribute to society as a whole.

Another aspect is whether the society is "segmented". The natural human behaviour is to develop systems of segmentation. These are normally patriarchal societies, but result almost invariably in feudal systems in which families group into tribes, clans and/or castes. Those systems of loyalty then are the mechanism through which people make progress.

Countries such as Pakistan record this on identity cards. Iraq has avoided this because of the concern that the ruling Tikritis could be unsafe in certain circumstances. It is, however, a very important factor - and perhaps the major cause of misunderstanding between the US and UK and other societies.

A third relatively trivial aspect is

religion. There is much more variety between the people who espouse particular religions than there is between the major religions. Where Liberals often go wrong is that they do not recognise that Islam in a segmented society actually tempers the potential human rights abuses that would otherwise result from unrestrained tribalism. Islam is mixed up with segmentation when the two are actually completely different aspects of any society.

Politicians who are used to segmented systems where individual and family loyalty is key have little overlap with politicians who are used to ideological politics. Inner city Birmingham politics, for example, requires an understanding of segmented politics as election results are influenced by it. It does, however, take quite a bit of understanding to really be able to work in that environment.

The real problem faced by the USA is that it has two choices. In a direct fight with the regime the USA will win. However, those associated with the regime are threatened by score settling from other Iraqis.

The USA can approach things in two ways. It can try to keep those who currently run the regime in power which will be dramatically resented by the others alternatively they can try to bring in others in which case there will be an attempt to settle scores against the ex-regime members.

Those people who are part of the regime are well aware of this. They know that between 14,000 and 100,000 people died in the civil war at the end of the first gulf war. It was this threat to the personal security of those associated with the regime that pushed them



back into supporting the regime in 1991; otherwise the regime would have fallen.

The USA, therefore, has a problem with the fact that those who are linked to the regime may fight to the death if they are likely to lose control. Alternatively they can try to maintain the power structure and then everyone else will want to kill a substantial proportion of those in power.

The second problem faced by the USA is that, if it tries to keep control, then as soon as the Ba'ath have gone the key priority of much of the Iraqi opposition will be to get rid of the USA. The USA is unlikely to use systems of oppression as forceful as the Ba'ath. People will wade into Iraq from all over the world with the objective of forcing the USA out of Iraq partially in body bags. That will not involve a full frontal confrontation of the US military, but attempts to get rid of them through attrition.

Even if the regime goes quickly, which is not that likely, there remain a number of problems.

The first civil war is between the regime and the rest of Iraq. This is likely to be a fight to the death. The second civil war is between the people of Iraq and the occupiers.

Where it goes from there is difficult to judge. Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia and

Syria all have interests in Iraq. In the past the Ikhwan have fought the Shi'a. There are still plenty of Turks living in Kirkuk. I don't mind trying to predict the first two civil wars writing now, but you will have to ask me later about what happens after that.

LETTER FROM AMERICA

Nathan Walker calls on the rest of the world to restrain his country's president

Hey everyone, listen! All you Brits – is that what you call yourselves? I'm just a stupid American – All you Brits over there, an ocean and a continent off, listen up!

My apologies for such a rude and presumptive introduction, but I'm having trouble starting this off. After all, just how does one introduce a dialogue intended for an entire population that sets out to ask them to please stop supporting his leader? I'm talking of course about the current tension between Iraq and my alleged president, Mr. Bush.

George W. seeks war with Iraq. He has said as much, and the only reason he hasn't already invaded and set his up father as interim governor is that the UN has held things up. Thankfully.

Keep in mind, all of Mr. Bush's accusations against Saddam Hussein rest on the point that Hussein is in violation of UN laws. He wants war because UN personnel acting on UN mandate have been impeded from doing their jobs. Clearly this is a United Nations matter – not simply an American one.

And yet Mr. Bush would impose war on Iraq, with or without UN approval. For the record, the majority of the Security Council seem unimpressed with my cowboy president's haste.

For Bush to launch a war "protecting" UN interests in opposition to UN desires is absurd. And yet your leaders support him. If the U.S. can launch a war against Iraq without UN approval, then why can't France? Or Italy? Or North Korea?

You see where I'm going with this. Such a war would de-legitimize the United Nations, and even so, my war-mongering, minority-hanging, quasi-democratically elected president would order a first-strike against the small and outmanned nation of Iraq. Of course, Mr. Bush plans to use only the most innovative and "safe" weapons available to his military, the most advanced in the world (he holds the title Commander in Chief, which is the leader of the armies), to "target" Mr. Hussein and his allies, leaving the Iraqi citizens untouched, and supposedly, better off.

Am I the only one who remembers the American "smart missile" that crashed through a certain Chinese

ambassador's window? Of course, of course, that was a regrettable mistake – one that I've heard will not be repeated.

But let's not forget that Dubya's brother ('Dubya' is Mr. Bush's nickname. I don't know if American linguistic anomalies are well-known abroad, but the Texan dialect pronounces double-u as dubya, that's dub-yah, emphasis on the first syllable, which is his middle initial.) ...Dubya's brother governs a state (Florida) that accidentally dumped a few stacks of used presidential ballots into the Atlantic Ocean. As Mr. Bush is such a supporter of family virtues, I'm sure he'll agree that characteristics like trustworthiness and intelligence often run in families. Good thing Florida has electronic

voting booths now. We won't have to worry about that in the future.

To be fair, I know none of the Bushes personally, but I was born and raised in America, and I know that Mr. Bush isn't even very good at reciting the speeches his boys write him. That, amongst other observations, is what my misgivings



are based on.

Speaking of Mr. Bush's presidential campaign, he made many promises to the "American People" during that time (for the record, Mr. Bush was appointed to his position by our Supreme Court, who voted him in by a staggering 5-4 margin). Some of his ramblings have since proven untrue. This is, regrettably, the nature of politicians.

Specifically, he said that America should be humble – his word – which is itself an interestingly proud remark. I find it questionable that such a humble nation would attack such a minimally-armed state as Iraq – and compared to the U.S., they certainly seem to be so.

The entire Iraqi military is on guard, but a small, easily-dispatched portion of our military stands poised to crush them in a single telegenic blow. Before the entire world. Whether the rest of the world, including Britain (hell, he doesn't even care what Americans think, so long as they obey orders and don't think too much) likes it or not.

Now you may say that Mr. Bush does care about what our friends the Brits think. We do know after all that he likes to take care of his friends. But he only cares because your leaders back him. This way, he can point and yell and shout “Vindication! Vindication!” and show the rest of the world that he actually has some international support for his war.

And what is it exactly that your leaders are supporting? What brand of politics has Mr. Bush cooked up so enticingly as to get them to do just that? He cares nothing for established policies or guidelines. Nor does he care for majority rule – more Americans voted for Al Gore than Bush – or vetoes. France or anyone else can veto all they like. My president will still order Iraqis killed. He said so himself, on multiple occasions, on TV.

What does this mean for the UN? Nothing good, I guarantee. If Mr. Bush’s war gets vetoed or voted down then the UN threatens itself, because he’ll still pick up his daddy’s gun. By committing to such a situation, the UN will show the world that it lacks the power to enforce its rules evenly. It will lose face to the world, and I’d rather not think about where it might go from there.

This, however, is if the UN refuses to be bullied. There are some very smart people working in the UN, and it might occur to them to go along with Mr. Bush’s war simply to avoid such a situation. This, in my opinion, is a very bad thing. The implications of such an act are staggering.

...And still your leaders offer him their support. They lend him their world-weighty names to tack beneath his own. I’m not sure if any of you have counted recently, but Mr. Bush’s and your own leaders’ are about the only ones on that list.

Just what is Bush’s problem with the UN, anyway? Ignore all the posturing, all the posing, all the cellophane that looks so good on camera. Mr. Bush’s main problem is that he can’t wait.

Hans Blix of the UN Inspection Team says that things are progressing, if slowly. The UN Security Council appears to be willing to ride out the wait. Why can’t Bush? He says we need to strike before Saddam does. But why hasn’t Bush been proved right yet? Why hasn’t Saddam attacked? Maybe it could be that his invisible weapons are incorporeal as well.



Bush says he’s afraid to wait because Saddam will certainly attack, given time. What I’ve been wondering is just how possible that is. The surveillance saturation that Iraq is experiencing at the moment must make it awfully difficult to move, much less use, any hidden weapons. Unless of course he uses them locally, which seems unlikely so long as peace still stands.

But my alleged president has thought of this. He knows that people will eventually see the near-impossibility of any direct attack from Iraq, which is why he needs to fight now. He would have you believe that the nebulous attacks will look more like those of September 11th in New York than a modern war. He hints at terrorist connections, and would have everyone see the invisible, incorporeal, nonexistent ties that would justify his war.

That’s what he needs more than anything else. Justification. But even more than justification before the rest of the world, he needs justification before America. I told you before, he doesn’t care what you think. If the right percentage of American citizens grant him their support, he will move to conquer Iraq as soon as he can, which is fast. Everything he does is aimed at upping that percentage, and his PR guys can be very persuasive to a lot of people.

I was reading a Time magazine the other day, and it reported that 57% of Americans in some Time/CNN poll said that “the final decision on disarming Iraq should be in the hands of the UN Security Council, not the President or Congress.”

See? Even most of us think he’s wrong for trying to take charge. One last time, I must ask you: Why do your leaders back him? For everyone’s good, the UN needs to keep control of this one.

And Mr Blair, if you read this: Please consider my words carefully; I fear you know not what you do. I say this with great respect.

STOCK RESPONSES

Those who want to criticise Britain's relationship with America will have to do better than rely on knee-jerk responses, argues Simon Titley

There's a story British people like to tell about Americans. When Alan Bennett's play 'The Madness of George III' was made into a film, it had to be re-titled 'The Madness of King George', otherwise American audiences would assume it was a sequel and wonder why they hadn't seen parts one and two.

It's a funny story but it's untrue. Its significance is not what it says about Americans but what it says about us. We have prejudices about Americans and express these through stock responses. The political issue of Britain's relationship with the USA has become acute but, if we want to develop a coherent policy, we must try harder than this.

The 'King George' story illustrates our key prejudice about Americans, that they are stupid people. A specific British prejudice is that Americans "lack irony", even though Americans produced 'The Simpsons', 'Seinfeld' and Woody Allen's movies. We can see no irony in criticising George W Bush's mangling of the English language, when we have our own world-class mangler in John Prescott.

The USA is a complex, multi-faceted society and, if we are honest, our feelings about America are mixed. If you know many Americans, you will know they are unusually open and friendly people. If you work in any academic field, you will know that American intellectuals lead the thinking in many spheres. You probably enjoy many aspects of American culture, such as music and films.

At the same time, you may despise American fast food, multinational corporations, excessive consumption and pollution and, above all, the Bush administration. The thing is, so do many Americans. In each of these categories of loathing, it is Americans themselves who are leading the opposition.

The country where fundamentalists flock to Wal-Mart to buy apocalyptic novels is also where the publishing sensation of 2002 was Michael Moore's 'Stupid White Men'. The country that guzzles 25% of the world's oil is also home to one of the world's most effective environmental actions, Ariana Huffington's campaign against 'sports utility vehicles'. And, lest we forget, half a million more Americans voted for Al Gore than George W. Bush.

So, when we are developing policy as opposed to cracking jokes, we need to be clear what we mean when we talk about 'America' and 'Americans'. We need to distinguish between things that are merely differences, things we happen not to like and things that actually matter.

What matters is where Britain's future belongs. The most important issue in British foreign policy is Britain's increasing failure to reconcile its relationships with the

USA and the EU. The conflict with Iraq has brought this simmering crisis to the boil.

Since the 1950s, successive governments have pursued the idea that Britain could form a 'bridge' across the Atlantic. Some (especially the French) always viewed this policy with suspicion. So long as the Cold War persisted, Britain got away with it, because a perceived common threat from the Soviet Union obscured any differences between allies.

Once the cement of the Soviet threat crumbled, it was inevitable that differences would emerge. Throughout the 1990s, the differences that caused problems between the US and Europe tended to be about subjective interests rather than objective values, principally trade disputes. Anyone who thinks the problem started with 'W' should remember the fuss Clinton made about bananas.

And here's the clue to where we have been going wrong in our assessments of the USA. Alan Clark once remarked perceptively that the mistake pro-American British politicians made was to assume the USA had objective interests. They took the cant about freedom and democracy at face value, and never realised that American policy is the outcome of domestic lobbying by subjective interests.

What Clark didn't point out is that America's critics make an equivalent mistake. The death penalty, gun culture and creationism are the type of issues that condition anti-American perceptions in Britain. But the significant thing about these policies, grotesque though they seem to us, is that they are also the products of lobbying by vested interests. We mistake them for the products of objective values because that's how our own system of party politics works.

While voter turnouts are lower in the USA than in Europe, there is a much higher level of citizen action in the form of lobbying, petitions and various types of grassroots participation. It ought to make for a much healthier political culture than ours, except that it is prone to money.

The weak point in the American political system is the role of 'campaign finance'. The cost of running for office in any significant contest is enormous, mainly because of the cost of TV advertising. A single candidate for the US Senate typically spends more than is spent in a British general election by all the parties and candidates combined. It is effectively impossible for anyone to run for major office without the financial backing of business interests.

Short electoral terms and the added burden of primary elections makes US politics a never-ending round of fundraising. And the money comes with strings attached. Bernie Ecclestone would have had no trouble

in America. It is considered quite acceptable for business interests to make campaign donations conditional on support for a certain line. It's the best politics money can buy.

For their part, the politicians (who, unlike their European counterparts, do not stand on an ideological platform) are quite happy to endorse whatever their financial backers demand, and may even shamelessly award their votes to the highest bidder. It is why, in Washington DC, campaign finance is the most important weapon in a professional lobbyist's armoury.

Understanding this political dynamic, the combination of corporate money and grassroots power, is vital to understanding American foreign policy. It is widely assumed by America's critics that oil interests are behind the war on Iraq. In a way, they are. Most senior figures in the Bush administration have close links with the oil industry. Ensuring supplies of oil from the Middle East and Central Asia is central to American geopolitical concerns.

But this policy would not be possible without the American people. It is only because most Americans are highly dependent on their cars and addicted to cheap petrol that the political power of the oil industry is possible. Without the domestic consumer demand, the oil industry would have little political clout.

Apologists for American policy may regard this process as democratic. In reality, it is what economist Fred Hirsch called "the tyranny of small choices," the collective outcome of individual decisions with no collective intent.

These consumers inhabit a country almost impervious to outside influence. Only about 10% of Americans has passports. Less than 1% of the content of American network TV is foreign-sourced. If you have ever been to America, you will have noticed the almost complete absence of foreign news on TV.

Most Americans neither know nor care about the outside world; in this respect, their President is representative. If they think about the outside world at all, it is largely in terms of stereotypes. Again, if you have ever visited America, you will know that the first thing most Americans want to ask you about is the royal family; it is the only thing their TV ever shows about us.

When foreigners are perceived variously as theme park Ruritians, dangerous terrorists or Stone Age savages, it is easy to see how a climate of opinion is created in which foreigners have no legitimate interests. The first step to denying equal dignity to other people is never to meet them. Isolation and ignorance help underpin a foreign policy based on a ruthless pursuit of perceived national interest.

Atlanticism is no longer a credible foreign policy for Britain, if it ever was. British politicians flatter themselves with references to the 'special relationship', but this relationship is special only to one side. America has shown no recent signs of reciprocating.

Even after September 11th, the US government again refused to declare Noraid a terrorist organisation, and has done nothing to stem the flow of money and weapons from so-called 'Irish-Americans' to paramilitaries in Northern Ireland. And if we want to know how 'special' the American government really thinks we are, ask any British steelworker or farmer about US trade sanctions.

The most astonishing act of American disloyalty to its allies, however, is the 'American Servicemembers' Protection Act' (ASPA). Remarkably, it received little media attention in Europe. It is a new law, passed by the US House and Senate in July 2002 and signed by President Bush, that authorises the military invasion of the International Criminal Court headquarters in the Netherlands, to free any US nationals detained by the Court. It seems so ridiculous I will say it again. The US has passed a law authorising an invasion of the Netherlands, a NATO ally and an EU member. The act is contrary not only to the NATO treaty but also international law. Above all, it is an act of contempt.

It is widely assumed that the problem is the

consequence of a right-wing Republican administration, and things will get better once the Democrats get back into the saddle. I am not so sure. In a political system where policy is an outcome of corporate lobbying, it makes little difference which side is notionally in charge.

The Clinton administration was just as aggressive on trade policy and just as ruthless in its use of the World Trade

Organisation on behalf of corporate interests. The contempt of the Bush administration for international organisations and treaties at least has the merit of honesty.

When Britain considers where its interests lie, it must think in terms of common interests. There will be times when our interests genuinely coincide with those of the USA and it is then desirable to form ad hoc alliances. On a personal level, we can continue to enjoy aspects of American culture and friendships with individual Americans. But it is not possible to maintain a close permanent alliance with a country whose foreign policy is driven by self-interested lobbies and is also much more powerful than us.

I have never understood how British Eurosceptics have got away with criticising the EU on the grounds of loss of sovereignty, while never criticising our loss of sovereignty to American corporate power.

Britain's future is in Europe because, however imperfect the EU may be, it provides a forum in which we can express common interests and a partnership in which we have some say. The EU's greatest achievement is often forgotten – it has made war less likely. Blair's policy of hanging on to American coat-tails will give us the worst of all worlds – isolation, no influence and tears before bedtime.



TO THE BARRICADES

When the Liberal Democrat federal executive voted unanimously to support the anti-war march, senior party officers and MPs swung into action to obstruct its decision and hamper efforts to gather party members for the event, reports Tony Greaves

For many years it has been difficult to make a case that the Federal Executive of the Liberal Democrats has been a body which – in the words of the old Liberal party constitution, relating to the late lamented Party Council – was about “stimulating militant Liberalism”. Or indeed about doing anything very much.

But there are signs that this body is beginning at last to get a grip on the things it is constitutionally responsible for: the strategy, tactics and organisation of the party at the federal or British level.

At its meeting on 21 January it woke up with a vengeance and set in train a series of events which led to the biggest gathering of Liberal Democrats since the party was formed in 1988, and for an overtly political purpose which united the party from leader to grassroots.

The FE unanimously passed a resolution moved by James Graham and Susan Kramer which reaffirmed party policy on a war with Iraq as adopted at the Brighton conference last year, praised the work of the parliamentary team, and went on to “encourage Liberal Democrat members to voice their concern about the Iraq situation, in particular by participating in the Stop the War demonstration...”

It also called on the party to publicise this through the press, the party’s email and internet facilities and Liberal Democrat News.

In the event more than 3,000 party members and their families marched together against a premature and pre-emptive invasion of Iraq as a distinctive Liberal Democrat section of the million and more who occupied the streets of London on that day. They carried some 2,000 placards and banners (including the Liberator banner!) and they were led by Charles Kennedy, Shirley Williams, a dozen or more peers and as many MPs, plus MEPs and council group leaders and a plethora of party officials.

A real breakthrough in party campaigning, and a signal for the future.

Well, not quite. It almost did not happen, thanks to blocking by key party officers and bureaucrats. That it did happen was due to one person and one party organisation – FE vice-chair Donnachadh McCarthy, who singlehandedly took on the organisation and co-ordination, and Liberal Democrat Youth and Students (LDYS) who did much of the practical work.

The day following the decision on 21 January, McCarthy got in touch with Hugh Rickard, the head of the party organisation at Cowley Street in London, to check how it would be carried out. Rickard was

enthusiastic but pointed out that it was mainly in the areas of campaigning and press relations, fields over which he said he had no control.

The FE Chair, party president and peer Navnit Dholakia, had agreed to give Donnachadh full authority to carry out the decisions. So he asked directly for action from the campaigns and press departments, both based at Cowley Street in spite of Rickard’s astonishing admission; the former headed by (Lord) Chris Rennard and the latter by Robin Bannerjee.

For the next three weeks McCarthy was met with a refusal to co-operate on most of the FE’s requests.

The Press Office refused to issue a press release and never did so either before or after the march. Their reason was the technical one that they work for the Parliamentary Office of the Liberal Democrats (POLD) and not the party itself.

The one press statement issued (on the day before the march) was put out by the leader’s office. Having lost patience McCarthy himself issued one on behalf of the party on the final Thursday.

Apart from the nonsense of all this blocking by a party resource which is far bigger than ever before and – arguably – of nor more use, it appears that the Liberal Democrats at national level have absolutely no press resource they can call upon to do their bidding as a party.

The federal (UK) party’s website is run by the Campaigns Unit, though the ultimate responsibility for its content seems hidden in labyrinthine bureaucracy. Campaigns said the decision could not be advertised on the website (other than in an obscure part of the restricted-access extranet).

Rennard is clear that he was acting under orders: his line responsibility is to the chair of the Campaigns and Communications Committee, Lord Tim Razzall, who appears to have been one of the main blockers of the required action.

Eventually after much pressure the notice was posted to the main part of the website but still merely “noted” the march rather than “encouraging” members to attend. The time and place was not posted until the Tuesday before the march, after Kennedy had finally agreed to take part.

Apart from coverage of the leader’s speech there was little subsequent coverage given to the extraordinary Liberal Democrat presence on the march, in stark contrast to the Scottish Liberal Democrats website which carried excellent pictures and lists of the top Lib Dems who took part.



Also at the apparent instigation of Razzall, Campaigns refused to send out an email to HQ's extensive list of members in spite of sending out a message from Kennedy on Iraq which stuck to policy (and which indeed distorted the agreed party line as confirmed at the FE). They quoted "technical reasons" which prevented emailing members with two messages close together (though it was not clear why they could not have both gone in the same email) in spite of having given large numbers of potential euro-candidates and, in London, mayoral candidates, the ability to do just that.

In the event McCarthy used not only his own London mayoral list to publicise the march but persuaded other mayoral and euro-candidates to do the same, and was in addition able to mobilise an astonishing variety of party email networks to get the message out, thus overcoming the bureaucratic numbskulls in the central party machinery.

Alone within the central party system, Liberal Democrat News under its editor Deirdre Razzall did what it was asked, though with a hiatus when nothing appeared in the second week after the decision, after a memo had been sent by Rickard informing the editor that the CCC considered that no publicity for the march should appear in the party newspaper.

The parliamentary party was no better than Cowley Street. Chief Whip Andrew Stunell refused for three weeks to circulate MPs about the march and the parliamentary party did not discuss the request from the FE that they should both consider the resolution and consider providing a speaker to the march.

This was all the stranger since the alibi of all these "powers that be" in the party became their insistence that the motion to the FE had been "referred back" to the parliamentary party, and nothing could be done until they had made a decision (and of course it was all too late). It was at the very least suspicious that this

assertion did not surface until some 18 days after the FE met, and in the event the minutes disprove it. The motion was clearly approved and the reference to the PP was merely for information to seek their involvement.

Kennedy's eventual decision to take part came after a slightly bullying leader in the Guardian (a response to a letter from McCarthy) and from being more than slightly bounced into it by David Frost on his Sunday morning TV programme. His final decision came at a meeting with McCarthy, in the presence of (Lord) Razzall and other apparatchiks, on the Tuesday evening before the march. By that time McCarthy was able to promise Kennedy at least 1,000 Liberal Democrats marching behind him, replete with bright yellow placards.

From then on most of the blockages and bottlenecks mysteriously freed up and the event (if not the party press and website promotion) really took off.

In the event it all happened because McCarthy devoted four weeks to it including taking a week off work; he got the enthusiastic support of the LDYS who made the posters; they raised almost £2,000 to pay for it all; and the party (as opposed to the party bureaucrats in London) discovered for the first time how to use the dissident power of the internet, including a website specially set up by Graham (to which – yes – the party refused to carry a hotlink from their official site.)

The basic organisation (stimulation of ideas and co-ordination) was done by a virtual committee "somewhere in cix", the idea for which was perhaps my own little contribution to an event about which we should be immensely proud as a party, but which if left to the people elected and employed to do these things would never have happened. Lessons, lessons, lessons, I think...

A matter for some considerable shame for a lot of people.

STICK IT ON A PIECE OF PAPER

The Iraq situation gives an opportunity to reconnect local campaigns with internationalism, says Liverpool councillor Kiron Reid

FOCUS EXTRA: Cllr Bloggs says "Don't Bomb Iraq".

Liberals have long been internationalists and concerned about social justice, as are some social democrats and Socialists and some Conservatives.

Liberals have often campaigned on international issues, maybe inappropriately given their irrelevance to the electorate. It has been said that you could tell Gladstone was a Liberal, because only a Liberal would fight a British general election on clearing the Turks out of Bulgaria. In the 1970s and 1980s the Liberal Party and later the Alliance started local community based campaigning, either as support for a principle of Community Politics or as a means of gaining credibility with the electorate. The active members started to campaign not on issues that were of concern to them, but on issues that were of concern to the electorate.

In 2003, those local newsletters, so often called Focus, and council group press releases should be featuring prominently the Liberal Democrat opposition to a war in Iraq. Those newsletters so often today contain nothing about outside borough policies or politics, nothing about the principles that the party stands for except the familiar campaign slogans. Deliberately, it is kept local to show the work that is being done by our councillors or campaigners on behalf of residents. This is putting our principles into practice but it appears in many places that the Liberal Democrats locally no longer tell the people what they stand for and what our policies, as part of a national political party, are. Followers of ALDC campaign advice and guidance will rail against the 'I don't patronise my electorate' tendency of those who fill leaflets with treatises on electoral reform and land value taxation.

On the other hand there are people out there who do want to know policies and are interested in the bigger political issues and it can't just be left to the media coverage of Liberal Democrat parliamentarians to provide that. The effectiveness of campaigning for Liberal ideas is weakened when the message is not reinforced at local level. This is why integrated

campaigning was invented. This led in large measure to the great general election breakthrough of 1997 by sticking to core themes of concern to the electorate, but on key political issues integrating the local and national campaigns.

Outside of general election time, where but in the few best constituency newspapers is this continued? Even in local elections ALDC and Campaigns Department have had to repeat and repeat encouragement to use the picture of popular leaders, Paddy Ashdown and now Charles Kennedy, on local leaflets. The impression of this writer is that many

newsletter producers do not want to put anything in their leaflets that is not specifically about the local area, often the local council. They should be including prominent content on our opposition to war in Iraq at this time.

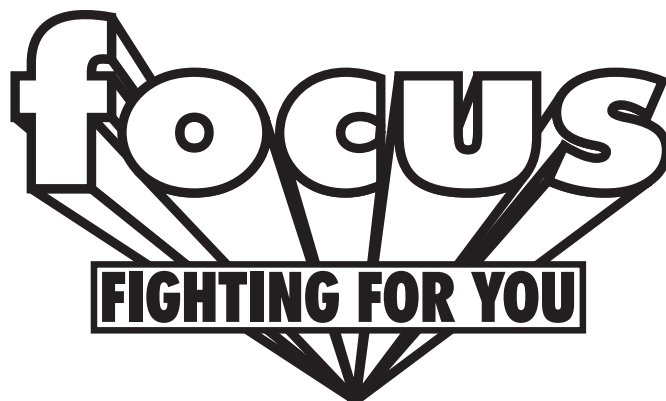
It is terrible to think that war may give us a political advantage but that is the reality of the situation. The war that does not command the support of a very large proportion of the British people, and the Liberal Democrats are the

only mainstream political party to express that opposition.

It may prove to be the case that his principled opposition has already made Charles Kennedy as leader in a way that opposition to the disgraceful treatment of Hong Kong Chinese made Paddy Ashdown's reputation for taking a principled and distinctive stand even before he came to greater prominence with the general public on his stand over Bosnia.

Maybe a big majority of the population will rally behind New Labour if there is a war. Maybe Tony Blair will suddenly vanquish his opponents as Mrs Thatcher did over the Falklands.

I don't think so this time – people who have opposed war for good reasons against the self-interest of George Bush and a section of Western businesses will still oppose the war even though they are loyal and support British troops in action.





As a political party, and as a party that is strongest at local level, the Liberal Democrats must take the lead as the party voice of this opposition at locally. Already the party has done a fine job at the national level. The pressure and clear stand by the Federal Executive; the excellent email briefings by the eCampaign Team and the Parliamentary Resource Centre.

These deploy the skill in disseminating information gained from the more recent Parliamentary campaigns. And the Leader has so far made all the right moves.

The national effort has to be sustained by local effort. There are two potential important political victories here. One is to actually achieve the policy result that Liberal Democrats and millions of others want – to prevent what continues to appear to be an inevitable but unnecessary war happening.

That may not end up written in the political books and columns as a great achievement in which Liberal Democrats played a part but it would prevent a lot of suffering and misery. If that fails the second victory will be for us to gain support from a Government that is not in step with a reasonable body of public opinion.

More and more Councils are passing resolutions expressing opposition to or concern about a war in Iraq. Liverpool, Glasgow, Cambridge among the first. To take Liverpool as an example, a war in the Gulf affects every single person in Liverpool. Apart from members of the armed forces from Liverpool going into action, there is the threat of international terrorism heightened as a major port and expanding international airport. The population movements caused by such a crisis will directly lead to more refugees and asylum seekers finding their way to the city. And each cruise missile costs more than £1 million. With the number that will be fired that is an awful lot of taxpayers' money that could help pensioners here.

All parties in Liverpool agreed (and it appears to have been the same in Cambridge) that it was important that a city such as ours show our disapproval on this to the Government. Some of us are also campaigning on this in our local leaflets. This crisis gives us a better chance than ever to explain why internationalism, redistribution of wealth from West to developing world, support for international human rights and fair trade are important to every man or woman in each city, town and village.

We know that until a socially just foreign policy is pursued by America and Britain and France there will be no lessening of support for terrorists, and refugees, asylum seekers and illegal migrants will come here in greater numbers.

We know, from the success of the BNP in some northern and in the past, in some London areas, that as activists we can't tackle racists unless we deal with real issues of public concern about asylum and immigration and show that the mainstream parties will address those concerns in a reasonable way.

Sometimes those issues are not ones that Liberal campaigners and members necessarily feel comfortable in highlighting. The risk of war gives us a chance to explain this. We have to take a principled stand.

Yes, we must explain that immigrants and refugees have always enriched this country and we must never stop promoting this country's often great (if chequered) history of giving sanctuary to those who seek protection.

With the local and self-interest angle we should tell people that their house prices and reputation of where they live will disappear if they are stupid enough to vote for a bunch of extremists like the BNP.

We should also take a stand and explain that the risk of terrorism and increased numbers of refugees will be increased by war and decreased by our leaders spending more taxpayers' money on foreign aid.

War for George Bush's family, or electoral, or big business reasons is not acceptable. As the clouds of war loom they are seen not just in the Gulf of Arabia but over Britain too. Internationalism and greater foreign aid can help create a better and safer community for those people as well as a better and safer world. We should be putting that message on pieces of paper and putting those through letterboxes, as well as dealing with the immediate local issues that take priority as direct concerns to more people. Then we can take on both the warmongers and the racists in a way that shows that Liberal Democrats take a principled stand locally and nationally on issues that really do affect people and we put all people first.

BLUNKET AS KING CANUTE

Globalisation condemns Labour's asylum policy to be both heartless and headless, argues Conrad Russell, Liberal Democrat Lords social security spokesperson

The proverbial Martian, paying a visit to Britain, would probably be astonished to discover that we think we have problem about asylum.

The level of a normal month's applications, depending on what is happening elsewhere in the world, tends to be about 6,000.

Even when we allow for the fact that each application represents a family, this is not even a football crowd: it is a cricket crowd. Even if, as some doom-mongers suggest, this year's applications top 100,000, this is nothing beside the total number of visitors who enter Gatwick and Heathrow every day, many of whom, like the American who was recently threatened with deportation after 54 years, simply stay on.

This needs to be set against the figures for outward migration, which, in the majority of the past 20 years, have exceeded those for inward migration.

This has gone into reverse since Kosovo but, taking one year with another, migration makes very little difference to the overall level of our population.

That level is steadily falling. The main reason for the fall seems to be rising house prices, which make people postpone childbearing until later and later in their reproductive lives.

There seems to be no prospect of asylum-seeking reaching a level where it can so much as keep the population steady. Talk of "our overcrowded island" seems beside the point.

Why, then, is there so much fuss about the level of asylum seeking? One reason, and the only one those who complain will mention, is a considerable rise in the number seeking asylum over the past 20 years.

In the early 1980s, it was in the region of 5,000 a year. Now it tends to be between 70,000 and 100,000 in a year. Explanations of this increase, on both sides, tend to rest on hypothesis rather than serious study.

For someone trained as a historian, the question 'why' must begin with the question 'when'. The answer is startlingly clear.

In the three years after 1989, the number of applications for asylum in the UK went up by nearly 40 per cent. Explanations, then, must start with the end of the Cold War. That clearly released a pent-up demand which had built up over many years, of which the tearing down of the Berlin Wall was symbolic.

The end of the Cold War also released a large number of old hatreds, which the iron hand of communism had kept in a deep freeze. The collapse of Yugoslavia and the war in Chechnya are symbolic of this

change. So is the persecution of the Roma in Slovakia, Poland and many other parts of eastern Europe.

The political map created at Versailles was the last attempt at dynastic state building, done without reference to the wishes of the inhabitants. In western Europe, the Versailles settlement collapsed in 1945. In eastern Europe and the Middle East it is only beginning to collapse now. This is bound to create a movement of populations parallel to that which happened in the years after 1945.

It is also becoming clear that the end of the Cold War deprived the world of a policing system which, in a crude and often ruthless way, had subdued many conflicts which can now burst into flame like a fire which is suddenly given air. It is hard to believe that the conflict in Rwanda, or perhaps even in Zimbabwe, would not have been temporarily subdued by an enforced settlement brokered by Russia and America.

In Africa, and especially in the Sudan, we have the further complication that the artificial post-colonial borders, which may be seen as Africa's Versailles, are also breaking down.

To these stresses, we must add two others. One is the steady blocking up of routes of legal migration. Just as a reduction in hospital beds creates increased pressure on casualty departments, so the blocking of legal routes of migration increases the pressure to claim asylum, the casualty department of international migration.

The other is the globalisation of the world economy. If capital has increased freedom of movement, either labour must have the same, of the worldwide advantage of capital over labour becomes overwhelming. Last time I debated this with a Conservative, I was able to extract rapidly from her the admission that she only "partly" believed in the free market.

To these we must add also the state's loss of the monopoly of armed force. The portable bomb has changed the balance of military technology. In the 1960s, armed resistance to a well-equipped state was almost impossible. Today, the IRA, ETA and the Algerian opposition, among many others, have found it all too easy.

We thus have increased pressure to become a refugee, and increased pressure for economic migration, happening at the same time. States, like so many King Canutes, are attempting to stop this movement of population by a deployment of resources such as has not been possible in any previous century.

We thus have a worldwide phenomenon, which is very far from confined to Britain. Per head of population, we are accepting numbers of applications well below the European union average, and world wide we are accepting no more than 1 per cent of the world's refugees. So, far from taking more than our share, we are taking a good deal less.

States, and especially the UK in the form of the Home Office, still dream like Piglet of getting their own nice comfortable colour again, and returning to the level of refugees current in 1985.

It will not happen. Under the UN Convention on Refugees, the foundation of international law on the subject, states are bound to admit claimants for asylum who have a well-founded fear of persecution.

The lengths to which the Home Office will go in refusing to see a well-founded fear of persecution are almost beyond belief. They believe that in Turkey serious attempts are being made to express the Kurdish identity, and that throughout General Mobutu's period of power in Zaire, opposition groups were able to function freely. Applicants whose stories contradict these beliefs are found to "lack credibility".

An applicant from Northern Cyprus, who had been severely beaten, was told his scars were self-inflicted. They were on his back.

An applicant from the Democratic Republic of Congo was told: "You say you were stripped naked, beaten and left in cell soaked in urine. The fact that you say this constitutes torture is so incredible as to cast doubt on all the rest of your testimony".

This is the sort of thing which is meant by the 'culture of disbelief' in the Home Office. It is not possible to use the proportion of successful applications as a guide to how many refugee applications are genuine, especially since, as Tony Greaves forced the minister to admit in the debate on the last asylum bill, Home Office figures for successful applications never include those who were successful on appeal. King Canute tried to do it with insentient waves: the Home Office is trying to do it with sentient human beings.

Part of the trouble is that asylum is handled by the same department of the Home Office as immigration. The whole culture of the Immigration Department necessarily measures success in terms of keeping people out. Applying this culture to asylum, which has quite different needs, only produces cruelty and injustice.

Politicians, most recently Tony Blair, compound the error by setting out to reduce the proportion of asylum

seekers who apply to the UK. Since we take less than our share, the justice of the objective is not obvious. More seriously, it is impossible because it is not under the control of the British government.

Crises such as those in Kosovo or Rwanda will always produce variations in the figure which cannot be changed by any attempt by the Home Office to deter applicants by treating them more harshly than our neighbours do. This is a genuine objective of the British government, as was clearly set out in the White Paper which preceded Jack Straw's 1999 Act.

The world numbers of refugees are primarily governed by conditions in the refugee producing countries. Their destinations are necessarily influenced by the map of the world's airlines, and so long as Heathrow prides itself on being the hub of the world's airline systems, it will attract refugees.

Beyond that, Mr Blunkett does not seem to realise that refugees are already worse treated here than in most European countries. It is no use claiming that they are attracted here by generous benefits when our benefits are well below the EU average, and when refugees do not get them anyway.

The policy is also vitiated by the fact that it rests on the traditional illusion of bureaucrats that the world knows what they do. Few enough British people are aware of changes in the benefit regulations. How are people supposed to learn about them in the back streets of Kabul or Baghdad?

I have not heard that these policies designed to deter are advertised in the press in the refugee producing countries.

This is very clearly illustrated by the effect of the 1996 Act, which allowed benefits to those who applied at the ports, but not to those who applied in the country. In the years after that Act, the proportion of refugees applying in country went up, not down.

This objective of reducing the number of applications is shared by the Labour and Conservative parties. Since they are bound to fail in it, each failure will be used to justify useless severity. It is a failure of intelligence as much as a failure of humanity.

The Liberal Democrats are not only alone in bringing a heart to this problem. We are alone in bringing a head to it. We should be proud of ourselves, even if the competition would be flattered by being called third rate.

A QUESTION OF SPORT POLICY

Laura Willoughby explains why she thinks the Liberal Democrats need a stance on sport

Some politicians are able, during speeches across the country, to find some link with an area, be it a visit during childhood, an aged auntie or stop for dinner at a local restaurant (code for service station on way up this evening!)

I do the same with my first political act - I can always find something I did in my childhood (always aged about 11) that links to a policy issue I am about to talk about. You may think with sport I would be hard pushed – you would be wrong.

On a primary school trip from Chard to London we were given the choice of going to the Natural History Museum or too look around Arsenal football stadium. No girls were going on the latter. I was outraged, I went, I was bored, but my first political expression had happened.

It is not this experience that makes me the choice for chair of the Liberal Democrat sports working group, but the ironic twist that I now live yards from Arsenal stadium, the club's new development is spearheading the biggest regeneration project in Islington and on the council I am responsible for sport.

The rest of the working group are also suitably experienced, with knowledge in a variety of sports as well as the role of volunteering, community participation, health and equalities.

However, in producing the consultation document for discussion at this spring conference the challenge has been using the principles from 'It's About Freedom' to drive a Liberal Democrat policy on sport. It is not as easy as it seems.

As Liberal Democrats we have always been clear that sport can bring numerous advantages to individuals and to society as a whole. Studies show that increased participation in sport can save the National Health Service millions of pounds in healthcare costs, can reduce crime in neighbourhoods and can improve the performance of children in school. Therefore, sport, as an activity and a passion is already a key tool in many of the other policies we advocate.

The Government spends 800 times more on healthcare than it does on sport, £1,135 and £1.38 per person respectively. Just a small reallocation of funding could result in long-term savings for the NHS and better health levels amongst the public.

Sport should be an integral part of the preventative healthcare agenda. This just related to physical health - we have also tried to explore the role of sport in personal development and well-being, an area that can affect mental health as well as an individual's ability to succeed in other walks of life, such as work and family.

There are enough good examples where sport has been used to tackle all of these issues, yet how do we create a policy that recognises the potential economic savings and community advantages when costing and measuring such benefits are hard.

This is a long term approach that competes with the new desire to invest in 'quick wins' and where the current solutions (as opposed to the prevention's) have been so underfunded that the potential to spend in this area alone could be described as a bottomless pit.

A recent pilot scheme carried out by the Qualifications and Curriculum

Authority found that increased physical activity at school leads to a dramatic improvement in classroom behaviour, concentration and academic results.

We need to learn from examples of good practice and extend these opportunities across the country. Access to support is certainly a geographical lottery and very dependent on the local authority both in terms of past investment, cash spent and imagination.

The current Government's obsession with testing and league tables has resulted in sport becoming marginalised in the school curriculum. What the government fails to realise is that more sport in school can re-engage children who have become uninterested.

The curriculum is becoming irrelevant, but sport can be used to teach a wide variety of skills, not just sporting skills, in an imaginative and interesting way. Sport can also re-engage parents in their children's education and be a tool for encouraging parents without English as a first language or with learning skills of their own to participate in the education and school-life of their child.

The much-publicised Government policy of two hours of sport per week for school children has failed to have an impact. The Secretary of State recently admitted that only 25 per cent of 5 to 16 year-olds are taking part in at least two hours of physical exercise a week.

Too many children are dropping out of sport while at school and never returning to participate later in life. Currently only 32 per cent of adults participate in sport more than 12 times a year. I am not sure how you define leaflet delivering - but as a fitness regime Liberal Democrats make buck that average!

How do we address issues of staff-pupil ratio's, cost of travel, lack of facilities and poor changing rooms in our schools? How can we use sports to add variety to the curriculum, improve learning and bring families together?

Sport also fits healthily into our ambition for local diversity and building communities - 'those that play together, work together' - or something like that.

But while in principle and in philosophy I feel we do not have a problem, in practice this is not so easy. While we want more people to participate in sport locally how do we achieve this without dictat and when public funding has its limits?

By seeing the 'professional' sports businesses, we could also look at the community and regeneration benefit they bring to an area - though should this not be the case for all businesses?

How do we address the fact that there are very few Asians who play football and accept that even if we stamped out racism it still may not be their sport of choice?

Is it the role of government to prescribe who should play what and when and how? How can sports be valued by local authorities as a tool for regeneration when housing and environment also need resources?

And how do we encourage diversity and autonomy amongst regional and national sporting clubs and bodies whilst under a Liberal Democrat government we also want to achieve our health, social and even gold medal ambitions?

Is a Liberal Democrat strategy for sport only two-fold? Is it more than increasing participation at grass roots level, whether at school or at amateur sports clubs? Do we need to go beyond just maintaining participation throughout childhood and into adulthood in order to obtain the maximum benefits from sport?

Another challenge, which I assume is an issue for all policy working groups, is how we create a policy that we would want to implement in Government, that is based on our ambition rather than the current state of sports funding, the economic issues in football, or even the debate over the Olympic bid?

How do we think beyond, outside and around this to create a policy that ties in with our values and is a deliverable blueprint for our future Government?

Achieving sporting excellence on the world stage is an important part of fostering national pride and self-esteem - how far would we go to fund this element while trying to achieve our social and local aspirations too?

Will higher participation at grass-roots level lead to a greater choice of athletes who are able to succeed on the world stage? Is that so important or should we focus on a bottom-up approach to achieve maximum benefits from sport across all levels of participation?

The consultation document looks at sports policy in relation to health, education, crime, personal development, equality of opportunity, regeneration, grass roots, amateur and professional sports, international tournaments and funding - and I am sure there is much more we need to add.

This is why I encourage you to respond to the consultation document. We are throwing the consultation open to organisations large and small which work in or have an interest in sport - a pack for use at local level will be produced by ALDC - help us find out what local sport is really about.

It is vital that sport is given more prominence by politicians and that

Government acts to increase participation in sport at all levels. It has always been the poor relation under successive governments, suffering from years of under-funding and neglect - under a Liberal Democrat Government that will change, help us work out how we can make that happen.

The document is available on www.libdems.org.uk and responses can be sent by 9 May to Jennie Ripley, 4 Cowley Street London, SW1P 3NB or by email to j.ripley@libdems.org.uk

AVOIDING THE MANATEES' FATE

Liberal Democrat conference committee chair Liz Barker sets out the proposals to change the event

Throughout the time that I've been a member of the Federal Conference Committee, and its predecessor the Liberal Assembly Committee, I've often wondered what it would be like to attend a US Democrat convention. The trouble is I'm not sure I would want to go to such an event now.

Modern day conventions seem pretty vacuous and if I wanted showmanship I'd rather hand my money straight to Disney. At least in Florida it is possible to escape the manufactured fun and go see stunning wildlife like manatees, before they disappear off the face of the planet. No, I would have liked to be at one of the conventions of the 1920s and 1930s, when delegates went through 28 ballots to determine the vice-presidential nominee.

Why a preference for something which now seems alive only in the recesses of Alistair Cooke's memory? Well, because political gatherings at which members make democratic decisions have a crackle of excitement which is all their own. Like the manatee, they are in danger of facing extinction.

Those were the thoughts in mind when I proposed 18 months ago that the FCC embark on a thorough strategic review of conference. During that time, consulting as widely as possible, the FCC has considered critically all aspects of conference, political and organisational. As a result we have come up with a report which makes approximately 130 recommendations for change.

It is important to make clear what the review is, and is not about. Contrary to yet another snide remark in *Liberator* a couple of months ago, it is not about making conference more expensive and therefore exclusive. It emphatically is about developing conference as a democratic forum, inclusive of as many members as possible, and as an event which backs up our claim to be the party of effective opposition.

A quick scan of the list of proposals, which we have included in the FCC report, should be enough to demonstrate our commitment to opening up conference to members, especially new ones. Keeping registration fees subsidised, offering free registrations and incentives for new members and constituencies

which currently do not take up their entitlement to representation are just two of the things we propose to do to increase participation.

We are proposing to cut registration fees for day representatives (voting and non-voting) in an effort to reflect the busy lives members lead as councillors and elected members of other bodies, while not undermining attendance for the full week. That is important if we are to continue to attract exhibitors. We propose to make registration at the unwaged rate available to everyone under 21 regardless of whether they have a job or not.

A key aim, for which I make no apology, is to increase the exhibition and sponsorship. Fine wishes to increase access and inclusivity, either political or practical or both, will be hollow unless we have the resources to keep registration fees down, subsidise the crèche, pay for signers, build temporary ramps and build up a bank of images which reflect our diversity.

We do not believe that building up the involvement of

commercial sponsors can or should be done in isolation from our politics. A fancy commercial exhibition would only detain me long enough to Hoover up the sweets and the pens were there not the prospect of a natter with *Liberator* and the History Group, not to mention the regular check that the Chard Group stuff is still bonkers. I suspect I speak for many.

We have stated explicitly that development of the exhibition must be with, and not at the expense of, party bodies. Since we have evidence from exhibitors that party stalls which look empty and untidy are a big turn off for them, we will work with SAOs to improve the look of their stands. If the cost of not doing so is that exhibitors pour money into the Tories and Labour but not us, and our campaign funds are smaller as a result, then I think it is fair to say that we have to agree some standards and enable SAOs uphold them. We also have to recognise that the exhibition is an opportunity for outside bodies to lobby us, and in return to hear what we think of them.



We've considered ways in which we can increase support to regions and constituencies in order to enable production of better motions.

Contrary to popular myth the FCC does not discriminate in favour of motions submitted by MPs, but given the research facilities at their disposal, they do tend to produce texts which are fuller, clearer and hence a better basis for debate. We want to try to remedy the balance.

Not all the recommendations for change pertain to organisational matters. We are looking at ways in which greater use of information technology can not only improve administration, but could be used to develop different ways of extending policy debates. We also want to spare people huge mailings by increasing availability of documents on the web.

We have even stuck our neck out and suggested that the fun and entertainment side of conference ought to be given a fresh look. No, we are not banning the Glee Club or the Revue; we're just suggesting that after several years it might be worth looking at whether they still serve their purpose and whether a change might be welcome.

There are two issues on which we have come to conclusions that will disappoint some people. On venues we intend to maintain our current policy: that while we continually look for new venues, and try as far as possible to hold spring conferences in the north of England, Scotland or Wales, for the foreseeable future autumn conferences will be held in Brighton, Bournemouth, Glasgow and, if we absolutely have to, Blackpool. I reiterate, we don't choose venues on the basis of personal or political preference. We go where we go on grounds of availability, facilities and cost.

For myself, I love Eastbourne, but the lack of exhibition space would mean a loss of income. Harrogate has the worst disabled access of any venue. And before the north west accuse me of snobbery, just think how cavernous the Tower Ballroom is.

It is fine for the Labour Party whose delegates appear to be nailed to the seats for the duration, but for us, who on a vote on a significant issue like double jeopardy could only muster 250 people in the hall. A week of empty seats would be a disaster.

Anytime we go to a venue in which we cannot cut down the number of seats in the main hall the feedback from people watching on TV is that the conference was a failure. By the way, I don't buy the argument that the hall is empty because people are in training sessions, they are busy having meetings, canvassing for list places, or simply gassing with mates.

Availability of venues will also govern the timing of autumn conference. While we are happy to try to make greater use of Saturday and Sunday, and perhaps a week earlier in September, thoughts of moving conference to the school holidays are simply not going to work. Even if we could get venues, and that is



doubtful given that it is peak season, there would be no media, no parliamentarians and precious few members of the public listening.

Finally, the vexed issue of the spring conference. Despite the wholly premature announcement by the chief executive in the Times last March that spring conference was likely to be abolished, we have come to the opposite conclusion.

We received a variety of conflicting and inconclusive complaints about the current content of spring conference along with the not unreasonable suggestion from the Federal Finance and Administration Committee that the event should not be subsidised to the extent that it detracts from campaigning.

However, at the time when the Tories and Labour are expanding their spring events, we think it would be wrong to scrap ours. Quite apart from the democratic deficit which that would create in terms of policy development, we do not see why we should abandon such events when we have uncovered hitherto untapped potential to market them much more widely.

We looked for, but did not receive, compelling arguments for making spring conferences subject specific, for example confined to topics such as Europe or education. We did take on board the need to weight the agenda of spring conference more heavily towards English business, but see the need to maintain a platform which can be used for Scottish and Welsh elections. Increasing participation by the Scots and the Welsh, rather than excluding them makes much more sense.

The FCC report lists our objectives for future development. The timetable may be overly ambitious, particularly in view of the fact that at the time of writing, a staffing and management plan has not yet been agreed with FFAC. If the FCC has got it right, we can look forward to conference 2010, when decisions are taken by knife-edge votes of 2500 to 2501, by representatives of all ages, ethnic origins, physical abilities and the rest.

If we are wrong, wave goodbye to an in-house conference operation and debates which inspire. While you're at it go to the Natural History Museum to see what a manatee once was.

WHAT'S HE DOING THERE?

Michael Meadowcroft laments the passage of Leighton Andrews from Liberal thinker to cheerleader for Blair's authoritarians

In recent times, on being told of Leighton Andrews' defection to Labour I've consistently dismissed it as being for too improbable. Indeed, to have done otherwise would have been akin to emulating Lewis Carroll's White Queen who "sometimes believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast".

Leighton Andrews? The colleague who kept the rest of us in line. The solid, dependable comrade whose Liberal instincts and libertarian heart could always be trusted. The anorak wholly at ease with fellow Liberal Revue satirists. The writer and editor whose solid work provided vital reference points. The intellectual Liberal prepared to take on David Owen and all comers at radical conferences. The friend as responsible as any for the tactics which got me elected in 1983. Impossible!

But, astoundingly it is true: Leighton Andrews is the Labour candidate for Rhondda in this year's Welsh Assembly election. It is far too easy to dismiss defections from one's party as being of no importance, just as defections to one's party are grossly oversold as being of planetary significance.

Leighton's switch of parties is different. It is not evidence of earlier being in the wrong party for his beliefs and personality, as was, arguably, Peter Hain. All of Leighton's pre-1996 speeches, writing and campaigning are consistently and solidly Liberal. New Labour is instinctively conservative and increasingly illiberal; one only has to read Nick Cohen's articles in the columns of the Observer and the New Statesman to see the evidence set out vividly.

With a track record like Leighton's, to become an advocate at this moment in politics for what is a travesty of even Labour's heritage and of any moral stance requires a massive disavowal of his previous principles and views. Perhaps unsurprisingly, all Leighton's current short biographical notes fail to mention anything of his Liberal past.

It was Leighton who coined the acronym LINK - Liberal Information Network - for the radical Liberal ginger group formed after the 1983 election, and who was the motivator of the group and of its radical conferences. Between then and 1987 he produced a series of excellent publications and articles. His booklet, *A Good Age - a Liberal Approach to the Politics of Ageing*, is both a powerful analysis of the stereotypes and a trenchant critique of the Conservative and Labour approaches.

He wrote: "Labourism's approach, which depends on a centralised strategy, the achievement of certain,

probably unsustainable levels of economic growth, and an emphasis on the scale of resources rather than the assessment of need and allocation of resources according to need, seems dedicated merely to perpetuating existing structures and confirming existing deficiencies.

"Labour is also suspicious of voluntary effort.... No self-criticism, no awareness that the state is not necessarily benevolent or even neutral, no commitment to pluralism." Interestingly, there is now a Labour commitment to pluralism, but of the market rather than of the voluntary sector - a Conservative attitude equally derided in the same booklet in which Leighton set out the Liberal Alternative: independence, choice, power.

In the following year, 1985, Leighton produced the pamphlet *Liberalism Versus the Social Market Economy*. This was a lucid and trenchant critique of David Owen's economic policies and of economic determinism, and a restatement of Liberal principles on the integrity of the community and on the vital need for economic and social welfare policies that promoted unity not division in society. In clear contrast to new Labour's shift towards Owenite views, Leighton wrote:

".... there are fundamental reasons for arguing against a transfer to means-tested welfare benefits for political activists seeking to challenge the divisions between those in and out of the workforce. Means-testing generally involves stigma, low take-up and a sharp division between those seen to be 'enjoying' the benefits and those paying for them. For a political party seeking to create a sense of community, as well as flexibility in employment patterns during the life-cycle, the Liberal universal tax credit scheme is the only way forward."

In the autumn of 1984 Leighton became a member of the Liberty 2000 group, which was set up to reassess Liberal themes in the light of the need to reverse the intellectual dominance of Thatcherism. He was also the vice chair of the party's Standing Committee (on policy) and a member of the party's National Executive.

He wrote the initial booklet, *Liberalism after Thatcher*, and was the author of the group's final report, *Liberty in Britain*. Again, as one would expect, Leighton produces a rigorous analysis of Thatcherism, often juxtaposed with contemporary Liberal writings, but, in his conclusion to *Liberalism after Thatcher* he also criticises Labour's flawed approach:

“...despite the efforts of some decentralist socialists, Labour’s response to the problems of the state has been little other than more of the same. Labour seeks to defend the indefensible by promising unrealistic public investment based on incredible growth levels. Real problems, many given to us by Labour governments and by municipal Labourism, are left unattended. Too many vested interests exist for it to be otherwise, particularly in the unions which, being centralised organisations, largely need centralised economic structures within which to work. The legacy of Labour’s post-war involvement in the planning of the welfare state also lingers on, particularly with their peculiar hostility to voluntarism.”

That sounds about right - and entirely consistent with all Leighton’s writings thus far, and with his valiant efforts as the Liberal Alliance candidate in Gillingham at the 1987 General Election. However, at around this point, possibly following the relatively disappointing result at Gillingham and the Steel bargain basement sell off of the Liberal party, Leighton understandably concentrated on his professional career, eventually becoming, in 1993, head of public affairs at the BBC. By 1996 he was contributing an untypically dry chapter - New Labour, New England - to a largely left-wing collection of essays, *The Blair Agenda*. This has all the marks of an Andrews essay: erudition, skilful handling of material, well structured, but with a complete lack of apparent commitment to any line.

It is in effect an academic position paper rather than a political argument. And in any case, why spin out twenty pages on Englishness, as opposed to Welshness and Scottishness, without grappling with the whole illogicality of the concept of sovereignty, or the more immediate realities of certain ‘natural’ identities, including, for instance, Yorkshire or Cornwall? Of course the arrogant belief that ‘British is English’ by so many south of the border is important and intolerable, but Leighton’s final conclusion is hardly a clarion call for anything:

“Tony Blair’s conception of new Britain fundamentally challenges the conclusions of decades of cultural thinking on the left of British politics. Alternatively romantic and pessimistic in turns, that cultural theorising has blocked the evolution, until recently, of a positive and dynamic Englishness conceived independently of the institutions of the British state. In a context of radical constitutional change, a positive sense of Englishness may be one

element needed within the culture of Labour and the left to entrench that change and enable Blair’s ‘new Britain’ not only to develop, but to survive.”

Come off it! This is sheer pastiche, and if I or any of Leighton’s friends had written it we would have rightly suffered a typically withering putdown. In retrospect, however, it shows the telltale beginnings of a shift of allegiance.

Coincidentally with this publication Leighton was appointed to a Welsh quango by William Hague but then metamorphosed into a key role in the ‘yes’ vote campaign in the referendum for a Welsh Assembly. Recently Leighton wrote to me saying that “Welsh perspectives are different from English ones”, and so they are, but when they lead to supporting the Blair nominee, Alun Michael, for leadership of the Labour party in Wales in a deeply flawed election system, the perspectives are alarmingly different.

Paul Flynn’s Welsh perspective on Leighton is vitriolic. In his book on the leadership campaign, *Dragons Led by Poodles* he calls Leighton, among other things, “oleaginous, accommodating, feline, apprentice shape-shifter”. This description bears no relation to the colleague we worked with so enjoyably for many years. What has happened to the Leighton we know and love?

In recent days Leighton, as one would expect, has been putting out a stream of comments on current events as they affect his constituency. All are boringly supportive of the new Labour line. For instance, he suggests that there are “four principal interlocking areas of policy that are essential in dealing with the drugs issue.” Leighton’s quartet of policies do not include any hint that decriminalisation has a key role. His main opponent accuses him of defending Blair’s support for America against Iraq.

How the mighty have fallen. To be in the wrong party at the wrong time, backing the wrong horse within that party, when, particularly in Wales, it is not needed to achieve political advancement, is especially perverse. What does this say about this former colleague? What does it say about the Liberal Democrats? And, indeed, where next for Leighton?

CONSUMING INTEREST

Dear Liberator,

Jeremy Browne believes that we have been experiencing a “revolution” over the last 20 years (*Liberator* 285).

Although it may be nice to view the world through the rose-tinted ad-hype of a multinational’s marketing department, this over-simplified optimism ignores a wider social reality.

Supermarkets may offer superficial “choice” and now put almost anything in their stores – but once the town centres are shut, try popping round the corner for an extra pint of milk, or go straight from the doctor’s surgery to collect a prescription, without having to drive several miles up the motorway.

And try having a family life, with the increasing nocturnalisation of working patterns.

When we opted for more “consumer choice”, no-one told us that we would also be choosing more stress, longer hours, more traffic and pollution, and less convenience for one-off purchases in the high street.

If there has been a “revolution” going on, why is there so much inequality? And why are whole communities blighted by poverty and lack of opportunity or affordable housing?

On the subject of public services, perhaps the reason that we can’t get that hospital appointment at 3 o’clock next Tuesday is that someone else has already booked the slot. Or someone with a more serious condition has to be given priority. Or perhaps the surgeon has gone down with ‘flu and not, as Jeremy Browne implies, just acting in the self-interest of a “producer”. (It seems that since the Tory Right has lost its voter-appeal, its rhetoric has found outlets in other parties.)

Modernisers claim to have abolished divisive politics, but are in fact attempting to set-up a new ‘us-and-them’ clash between “consumers” and “producers”.

This is an absurd division, since most people are both. Despite the hype about being a “nation of consumers”, we still spend more time working than shopping.

As citizens, we might realise the limitations of attempting to facilitate choice in a public service within a

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limited budget, and have the understanding that other peoples’ needs may be more pressing than our own.

As consumers, we are encouraged to adopt a “me now” impatience, and an intolerance of other peoples’ interests, and a “me too” compensation culture.

Public services exist to serve the whole community and have to reconcile all of its diverse needs; they cannot and should not attempt to satisfy consumerist wants, as that can get in the way of their fundamental purpose: to satisfy need. What happened to the idea of the community getting together to improve services for all?

The ethos of the market has been extended into places where it is not wanted; our citizenship and our ability to change economic policies through the democratic process having been sold over our heads. The fact that we are consumers is all, it seems, that matters. This is what Lionel Jospin condemned as the “market society”, served, as Rowan Williams described, as the “market state”.

Has the “new politics” struck a chord with the people? Evidently not. The old, ‘left/right’ battles between Neil Kinnock and Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s generated turn-outs of 75-80 per cent. The brand-chasing, marketing-department consumer politics of today has been the largest turn-off in the history of modern democracy.

People are not necessarily as self-interested as some sociologists suppose. On a radio phone-in a few months ago, when discussing the merits of “parental choice” in education, a member of the public commented that if a local school is failing, that is a matter for the community, and that “parents should get involved”.

Why is it that we rarely hear such enlightened points of view from the political establishment?

If the brave new world of politics means corporations and market forces stomping arrogantly into every corner of life, bringing inequality, suspicion of workers, ever-increasing resource-depletion, and encouraging a ‘me-now’ consumerist mindset, then I don’t want to be part of this so-called “revolution”. I just want my citizenship back.

Andrew Toye
Exmouth

SUPPLY AND SUPPLIERS

Dear Liberator,

Jeremy Browne falls into the Thatcherite trap of downgrading the public from citizens to “consumers” (*Liberator* 285).

A consumer has an economic relationship with a supplier. The supplier can choose what is supplied and whether or not to serve that particular consumer.

A citizen is an active participant who has rights to influence what and how the service is delivered or even if it makes sense to have the service at all.

Treating people as consumers disempowers citizens as it restricts their options to goods or services. It also therefore plays to the pockets of suppliers, be they private or public.

Rob Wheway
Kidderminster

Alan Clark – The Last Diaries (In and Out of the Wilderness)
Edited by Ion Trewin Weidenfeld and Nicholson 2002 £20

I worked as Alan Clark's Private Secretary in the Department of Employment in 1983-85 (and was not mentioned by name in the first 'Diaries', but only by implication as one of the 'officials' who bullied the Minister into reading his official papers – quite true). After I left his office, I had little or no contact with him until 1998 when, recovering from a long and debilitating illness, I introduced myself to him when he was book-signing at the Hay-on-Wye Literary Festival. At the time I was struck by his vigour and healthy appearance which contrasted with my own enfeebled condition (18 months later I was back at work and he was dead). What also struck me was the ease with which he comported himself as a celebrity – his patience with book purchasers, his fluency in the preceding on-stage interview – which differed from the somewhat gauche and impatient junior Minister I remembered. Had he been mellowed by fame and the advancing years and thereby lost his edge?

After reading the Last Diaries, I think so. Of course allowances must be made for his age and no doubt profound disillusionment with the Tory party, but one should not expect from these Diaries the same coruscating dismantling of personal foibles and major political reputations which was, for political animals, the main attraction of the first Diaries. Partly of course this is because for the central period of the years covered in this volume, Clark was out of Parliament, having decided not to stand in the 1992 Election. Even so, from a political point of view, there is more from this time that one would like to hear about – for example, on why Clark supported the Serbs, or the intricacies of the Matrix Churchill affair. To some extent it seems Clark did not record his feelings on these matters – bizarre when so many other intimate details are recorded, though typically perverse of the man. But also, clearly, the editor opted to give a fuller picture of Clark's personal life. If that was to give a fairer picture of Clark's

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(genuine, as I could attest) love for his wife, as I suspect it was, this was well overdue, but I felt there was too much obsession with Clark's every minor premonition of illness and death, which was less an uncanny presage of impending disaster than simply a reflection of Clark's lifelong hypochondria.

Having said that, this remains a book that should be read by the devotee of politics, especially those who delight in the demise of the Tories, since there can be few better descriptions of the Tory shambles in 1997-99 than this one (and little seems to have changed in the 5 years since). Perhaps Clark himself is a symptom of that malaise since he seems to reflect far more on the Tories' inner machinations than on broader political movements in the country and on other parties' (especially Labour's) engagement with them. By the time he returned to Parliament I suspect he was too much the successful author, political commentator and chat-show guest and less the strategic political thinker.

And the book is certainly essential reading for those who simply enjoy good writing and who have an interest in the personalities and motivations that lie behind the practice of politics. The Press have consistently described Clark over the years as fascinating, complex character whilst at the same time pigeon-holing him into the few simplistic categories in which lazy journalists of limited intellect are wont to take refuge (maverick, womaniser, arrogant, extreme right-wing). Alan Clark was many of those things but could contemporaneously be the complete opposite, and was always original, independent and often curiously 'politically correct' in his views. No-one should avoid reading his books on the basis of the inane Guardian-reader-type caricature of

Alan Clark. I hope one day he will be blessed with a biographer who will do him justice – more than he sometimes did himself.

Gwyneth Deakins

The Asquiths
by Colin Clifford
John Murray 2002 £25
(hardback)

One of the many tributes to Roy Jenkins remarked that:

"Asquith (like Jenkins) was 'the epitome of the Balliol man'; he was 'cultivated' and 'brilliant'. From the grinding toil of the Labour back-benches in the 1960s, with all that trade unionism and class politics, the wit and beauty of the 1900s was entrancing. From the drudgery of Labour party conferences, Jenkins transported himself back to the clubs, dinner parties and gossip of Edwardian England."

And the world of the Asquiths is entrancing. This book is filled with extraordinary characters with extraordinary names: Harold "Bluetooth" Baker, Kakoo Tennant, Bongie Bonham-Carter. Even Asquith's own children had nicknames like Beb, Oc and Puffin.

Clifford rushes through Herbert Asquith's early years, perhaps because the sources there are less complete, and I would like to have known more about his first wife Helen, who died leaving him with five children. Even so, the book comes to life with the arrival of his second wife Margot.

Like Bertie Wooster's Aunt Dahlia, she was happiest when hunting the fox in High Leicestershire. So much so that we find Asquith writing to her in the following terms after their engagement: "Your remark that you didn't know the boys' names amused me, but why should you?"

He also asked in passing if she would like to give his youngest child a different Christian name.

Such an attitude to family life would sound extreme on a sink estate, but Margot and her stepchildren got on well enough though she always seemed jealous of her indomitable stepdaughter Violet. In due course the boys – Raymond, Beb and Oc – went on to glittering careers at Oxford. Perhaps it is because I read that chapter on the train back from Somerset as a couple of Hooray Henries arranged their New Year’s Eve party by mobile phone, but I felt that their time their merits neither the space it is given nor the seriousness with which it is treated.

But now the shadows were falling upon the Edwardian Golden Age. Asquith’s eldest son Raymond was killed on the Somme and another son suffered terribly from shell shock. Raymond was mourned by many as a lost leader of his generation, and eventually it was Violet, as Violet Bonham-Carter, who emerged as the most remarkable of Herbert Asquith’s children.

This book is great fun, but one serious point it touches upon is worth noting. Modern Liberals have grown up with the idea that Lloyd George’s assault on the landed interest was the most glorious moment in the party’s history. Yet at the time Margot Asquith was deeply critical, arguing that the vituperation he poured over the aristocracy was being presented by the Tories as an assault on all property owning and threatened the Liberal Party’s broad social base. And who is to say she was wrong?

Jonathan Calder

Diaries 1987-1992 by Edwina Currie Little Brown 2002 £18.99

What do these diaries tell us about the great affairs of state, as opposed to the trifling affairs of some of the players? Rather less than I’d hoped. We have an insight into the divisions in the Tory party - the conflicts between the One Nation Tories and the Tory-libertarians, particularly with regards to Health Service policy. Currie held ministerial position for only a short while, and

thus made little impact, which is a pity.

Many of her faux-pas (at least that is how the press exploited them) were actually telling it straight.

I’m not terribly interested in who shagged who in the Tory party. It is a sad reflection on Currie, Little Brown and the press that it was felt necessary to go into this detail in order to sell a book.

Stewart Rayment

How the Left Can Win Arguments and Influence People by John K Wilson NYU Press 2001 £11

This is a useful and thought-provoking American book. It deals with language, political strategy, tactics, and policy in roughly equal measures.

Wilson’s key claim is that established notions of the US (or Britain?) as a mostly conservative society are wrong. He argues that Americans are progressive; that ‘the left’ has let ‘the right’ win and needs a new approach. While many Liberal Democrats are uncomfortable with the over-simple concept of left-right, and the party leadership (wisely) tries to avoid being distracted by debate over labels, it’s clear from his book that Liberal Democrats are the “progressives” Wilson seeks to advise.

He starts by insisting non-conservatives should abandon self-descriptions such as ‘socialist’ and even ‘liberal’ and demonstrates how these labels have come to communicate nothing positive to American voters. But, this is not a Blairite book. It does not suggest that losing progressive principles is a prerequisite for success. In subsequent chapters on globalization, education, environmentalism, Wilson shows himself a radical liberal.

His message on language is a reminder of the need for “progressives” (the term he wants adopted in place of socialists or liberals) to talk to others, not just themselves. Wilson does not have much in common with Old Labour. He rejects portrayal of the ‘free market’ as an inherent evil and his a civil libertarian. Instead he calls for a “progressive capitalism” and a free market that is properly free, with

opportunity properly shared. One can imagine the average Liberal activist enjoying his thesis more than our Labour counter-parts. Many of Wilson’s points reminded me of the Alliance manifesto from 1987.

Analysis of the great “right-wing conspiracy” (ref. Hilary Clinton) is interesting. A pack sent to local Republican parties entitled, “How to Speak Like Newt” is amusing but poignant. The extensive vocabulary Gingrich instructed on-message right-wing activists to use doesn’t include “equality” or even “justice”. Wilson’s strategy is to move the fight onto terms such as these, which are familiar to Americans but which are uncomfortable for conservatives. The right has come to dominate the media in terms of both ownership and influence. The vast majority of complaints about the media, research shows, are made by conservatives. But, the ‘liberal media’ myth can be powerfully debunked.

Campaign finance predictably comes in for robust attack. His case against “legalised bribery” is strong (and amusing) and will provide helpful prep for liberals in debate on this issue, especially if unions accept Wilson’s view that funding the Democrats (and Labour?) is worse than pointless. In the US legalised bribery extends beyond funding of parties and candidates. Pesticide makers, for example, have given cash specifically to members of the House Agriculture Committee (Democrats and Republicans alike). It would be interesting to know whether this targeted bribery co-exists in the UK.

The book’s format includes boxes containing the vital argument on a key point. However, this very unacademic feature helps quick reference (not aided by the regrettable lack of an index) and works well. A good example is the box on why disclosure of funding (such as the PPERA in the UK) is not enough, when so much of the media is controlled by the same financial interests and investigative journalism has all but died. Wilson’s comments on public broadcasters are of value as we hear UK Conservatives attack the BBC and Channel 4. In Kent, Tories recently deemed Radio Kent biased for having the gross audacity to report the plain facts of a councillor calling young people “brain-dead”.

Wilson is a fan of public protest. He sees Seattle as a victory spoiled by a few violent anarchists equally worthy of condemnation as the protest's corporate subjects. He regrets that a more organised movement hasn't emerged following such protests, or at least not a radical liberal one ready to distance its self from anarchists and marxists.

"Pragmatism" is a key word in Wilson's strategy for victory. However, he emphatically distinguishes this from Clinton's "abandonment of substance". His pragmatism includes reclaiming aspects of liberalism. The antigovernment perspective (so crucial to the party under Gladstone) can be taken up now and so even can "antiwelfare ideology". The rhetoric underpinning Tory attacks on social security can be used to argue against massive subsidies for unproductive businesses (wasn't that what Liberals did when we fought the Corn Laws?). The Federal Government gives out \$125 billion in subsidies to business- the same businesses who bank-roll politicians.

Wilson dislikes attacking "right-wing nuts". He points out that some 'libertarians' oppose corporate welfare and some religious conservatives oppose capital punishment. Wilson sees no reason why these people can't be brought into the progressive coalition on these issues. Indeed, that is the way forward if we are talking about the 'ordinary' person on the doorstep. You can dismiss a religious person who is "anti-gay" as a "right-wing nut". But if you discuss with that voter your shared view that racism is wrong, that can be a step to them listening to you on other issues.

Wilson is anxious for tax cuts for the poorest and sees embracing the language of tax-cutting, previously monopolised for the benefit of the wealthy, as a way forward. The rich-poor divide has become so wide that income tax could be easily abolished for those earning up to, say, \$25,000. A fraction of US economic growth could accommodate this without a need for cuts in spending. Liberal Democrats might have made more in 2001 of our plans to lift tax off the poorest. Saying that we would, say, make the first £15,000 of

income tax free (£30,000 for working couples) would be a weapon of mass destruction in our fight to replace the Conservatives as the more popular opposition party.

The basis of taxation comes in for powerful critique. George Bush invested \$600,000 in a Texas baseball team. A government subsidised stadium turned that into \$15.4 million. He paid only 20% tax but had he earned it rather than got it through an investment he would have paid more- nearer to the higher rates paid by Americans on the minimum wage. There's no good economic reason why capital gains deserve to be taxed less (i.e. subsidised) than earned income. Reform please.

For an author who rails against sound-bite culture Wilson provides some gems. "Conservatives aren't tough on crime: they're stupid on crime" is memorable. The unjustifiable difference between income tax and capital gains tax is paralleled by the huge numbers imprisoned for minor non-violent crimes whereas 'white-collar' crime goes barely punished. You can get 16 years for shoplifting a candy bar in some states while corporate fraudsters stealing millions from pension funds have little chance of seeing jail. That's if they even get caught given how US law enforcement is targeted. Conservatives want the "symbol of prison" without the rehabilitation to make them work. Providing good education in prison would lead to questions about why good education isn't provided outside prison- issues to make conservatives uncomfortable. Wilson's guide on how to convince the 'average American' to vote against the death penalty is full of 'common sense' (to reclaim another phrase, previously used by Radicals, from the right) and tragic statistics.

Wilson claims "no issue holds more promise" for liberals than education. Not all of this section of the book is as easy to apply to the UK, but his discussion of "choice" as the preferred conservative buzzword is insightful. Real freedom of choice needs a) state schools receiving equal per student funding and b) admission to state schools on a non-discriminatory basis. A good progressive stance on 'religious schools' is offered. In America conservatives often argue for "prayer in schools". Wilson is a

staunch defender of free speech and believes children should have a right to pray in schools, but of course free speech should also include the right not to pray. As for the curriculum, evolution is an unsurprising example of conservatism being rubbished by Wilson. One does detect slight intellectual contempt on Wilson's part for conservatives but this doesn't detract from his own well thought out arguments.

Other issues discussed, and the best rhetoric for liberals to use for each, include race, gay equality, the environment, healthcare, gun control, and international law. In all, a good book full of both radical ideas and practical points for how to move public debate to a place where liberals win.

*Antony Hook
Stewart Rayment*

A Short Walk Down Fleet Street by Alan Watkins Duckworth £18 2000

I've long had a problem with Watkins' newspaper political commentaries. Sure, they are often perceptive, sometimes amusing and usually well-informed, and he has no animosity towards Liberal Democrats as such, but they invariably include vast digressions into the minutiae of 1960s politics in order to illustrate a contemporary point.

If Watkins is saying something of relevance today, I rarely feel that it has more impact for knowing that Ray Gunter once said it to Fred Peart, or whichever Labour figures of yesteryear Watkins has chosen.

This book is a bit like that in style. Essentially it is a collection of anecdotes from the author's long career as a political journalist, related rather in the disconnected style of an evening's reminiscence in some Fleet Street hostelry.

There is plenty of interest and entertainment, but I came away with the feeling that maybe you had to be there.

Mark Smulian

Tuesday

We have recently suffered another sad death in our Liberal family: dear Richard Wainwright is no more. Several generations of activists owe their introduction to the world of political campaigning to his famous little guidebooks with their hand drawn maps – I have his West Country Marginals open in front of me as I write – where every feature of interest, be it an awkward letterbox, an aggressive farm dog or a particularly austere Primitive Methodist chapel, was meticulously noted. These modern fellows with their EARS, their fur-lined canvassing boots and their “contented conformers” are all very well, but many of us still prefer to reach for our Wainwrights when faced with a sticky by-election.

Wednesday

Dinner with Phil Willis. I seldom saw eye to eye with headmasters in my young day (not that that was the position one was always invited to assume), but we get on tolerably well. I deem it wise not to mention the handwritten verses he left in his room last time he stayed at the Hall; besides I could not bring myself to read further than the opening couplet: “Oochie, coochie/Nigel de Gruchy”. After the meal we invite the chef to the table to receive our compliments. I notice that the hotel has a balcony overlooking the restaurant and suggest that it might be a jolly idea to put a few tables up there so that diners can enjoy the view. Willis, however, is against this idea because it would involve a two-tier service.

Thursday

Malachy Dromgoogle calls to ask if I will I be marching against the war on Saturday and certainly not to seek my support in his campaign to be the Liberal Democrat candidate for Mayor of London. I say that I would come but, as I am busy on the Estate and am looking forward to the rugger international on the moving television, I think it unlikely I shall be in Town this weekend and will he kindly give my regards to his roof panels? Besides, I deem it better to stay close to the Hall because Meadowcroft is in a bate about this GM food one reads so much nowadays. “They tomatoes be argifyng,” as he pithily puts it. So much so that I wonder whether the seed I obtained from Dr Harris’s laboratories was such a good buy. When the Prince of Wales invited himself to look at my gardens the other day I told him that he was welcome to come but probably would not get a word in edgeways.

Friday

The Government’s dossier on Iraqi arms reaches me under a plain brown wrapper – Ashplant isn’t the only one in this party with contacts in the world of intelligence, you know. I settle down in the Library to read, and it soon proves strangely familiar. Gradually it dawns upon me: the whole thing is lifted word for word from my own Through Mesopotamia with Rod and Line. The maiden voyage of my airship, the thrilling match against King Faisal’s XI, the first Lady Bonkers’ fight with the jackal... They are all there. What an outrage! And no mention of royalties either! I send a telegram to Dromgoogle telling him I shall be there on the morrow to lead the march. By the way, if anyone knows Rod’s current whereabouts I should be grateful to hear from them.

Lord Bonkers’ Diary

Saturday

We are thousands strong as we march with out yellow banners flying, and all the foremost Liberals are here. The lovely Hazel Grove, Philip “Whoopi” Goldenberg, Sugar Ray Michie, the Flying Bellotti Brothes, Patsy Kensit from Cheadle, Paul Tyler (who has shaved his hands for the occasion), Lembit Opik scouring the horizon for stray meteorites, Mrs Bollard, Alan Beith with his euphonium, even Kennedy himself... Yes, they all take their turn carrying my sedan chair. When we reach Hyde Park I find the platform speakers something of a

diappointment: Michael Foot waves his hands about and shouts every seventh word; an elderly fellow by the name of Tariq Ali calls for world revolution; Wedgwood Benn tells us that Saddam is the latest in a long line of English radicals that includes the Diggers, the Suffragettes and Arthur Scargill and deserves our support. Just as I am about to add a few well-chosen words of my own, a bossy woman called Jowell appears to tell us to keep off the grass, wipe out feet and blow our noses (or possibly to wipe our noses and blow our feet). People – especially those given to writing letters to the Manchester Guardian – ask me why these ladies from the New Party are so often accused of nannying the public: I suspect they will find that the reason is that they so often do nanny the public.

Sunday

The newspapers tell me that two more Conservative MPs are on the verge of joining us: suddenly certain events I have witnessed of late fall into place. In recent days Rising Star (the Red Indian chief and member for Winchester) has been much in evidence in the tearoom where, dressed in full fig (feathered headress, tomahawk and so forth), he has been passing plates of macaroons to some of the wetter Tory backbenchers. “They want to cross um Buffalo River but squaws make heap big trouble,” he comments gnomically. Incidentally, aren’t you a little tired of the way Fleet Street constantly gets his job title wrong? He is not, as they would have it, Chairman of the Liberal Democrats but merely Chairman of Um Parliamentary Party.

Monday

Still in London, I awake at Bonkers House in Belgrave Square to find the city strangely quiet. While my bath is drawn I look out and see that the streets are empty. By 10 o’clock urchins are playing footer and spontaneous street parties are breaking out; street sellers cry their ways, then sing and dance. Say what you like about Livingstone (and I for one have been critical of his decision to shoot all the pigeons and fill Trafalgar Square with newts – they bite the tourists, steal their mobile telephones and raid the ice cream vans), this Congestion Charge is quite the thing. I trust that, whether our candidate be Susan J. Kramer, Dromgoogle or the Revd Hughes, we shall promise to keep the thing in place. Why, I may even have it introduced in Rutland!

Lord Bonkers, who was Liberal MP for Rutland South-West 1906-10, opened his diary to Jonathan Calder.
