

Towards a Liberal Future

During the recent leadership campaign and in speeches since his election, Sir Menzies Campbell articulated some important themes which we would like to develop further. These concern the manner in which the Liberal Democrats campaign, the Party's image and conception of itself, and the prospects for a Liberal future.

(i) Localism

"When we campaign for greater localism we must be clear what we mean"

Sir Menzies has spoken of challenging the Party's 'comfort zones', of which a crucial one is localism. The conception of community politics as "a system of ideas for social transformation", as envisaged by its original authors, is almost unrecognisable from the language and practise employed by local Liberal Democrats nationwide: the Party has been guilty of leaning too heavily on a short-term by-election mentality, which has failed to cultivate a lasting Liberal constituency and whose techniques – often crudely employed – have been aped by our opponents, with some success. Liberalism is the philosophy of all classes and of none, and does not and cannot prosper by manipulating sectarian or communal opinion; after all, the prejudices of the majority are not necessarily liberal ones, and as Jo Grimond put it, what is the purpose of a Liberal Party if it does not seek to espouse liberalism? The Liberal Democrats must posit an affirmative and ambitious localism, particular to a locality but universal in principle, which seeks to reinvigorate politics as an immediate and important project, and which in terms of campaigning communicates our core values of liberty and fraternity.

(ii) Campaigning

The Party's slogan at the last election – Freedom, Fairness, Trust – failed to evoke in the public imagination the sense that the Liberal Democrats offer an attractive philosophy and a serious and coherent set of policies. What, exactly, does 'fairness' mean? If the Party is to move "out of the comfort zone of opposition politics", as Ming has argued, it must move away from the easy *contra* ('Just Say No') mentality: a group of individuals cannot engender or promise trust any more than an institution can, particularly in the sphere of party politics, and it is disingenuous to suggest otherwise. The single greatest problem for the Liberal Democrats is that the public do not have an immediate sense of what the Party stands for. Subsequently, Lib Dems stand accused of offering different hymn-sheets to different audiences, a situation that will continue until the Party articulates the philosophy that inspires and drives policy, and until this philosophy rests in the public consciousness as a set of guiding principles. (If the public

are given 10 points of policy, they will know where the Party stands on these issues: if they are offered an overarching narrative, they can imagine the Liberal Democrat response to any or each of the matters that are of interest to them).

We also call for a constitutional review to look at changing the Party's name back to the Liberal Party. Liberal Democracy is a system of government, not a political philosophy, and registers its emphasis on democracy, rather than liberalism. All three contenders in the recent leadership election spoke of furthering the cause of liberalism, and evoked the achievements of Liberals: for consistency and clarity as much as for intellectual honesty, surely it is time to match the word to the deed.

(iii) A Liberal Future

"I want the Liberal Democrats to be the party of opportunity, aspiration and ambition"

Sir Menzies noted in his Spring conference address that "under New Labour, politics has become managerial, not inspirational", and that it was important that the Liberal Democrats offer a viable, values-orientated alternative. We believe that the Party must affirm its creed more vocally and with greater confidence, and advertise a commitment to raising the condition of every citizen – not merely economically, but in terms of a compelling ethical vision that is capable of cohering a diverse and pluralistic Britain.

Fortunately, the Party's broad church continues to coalesce around key issues (individuals may disagree on the particulars of Post Office privatisation, but the gut instinct of members and parliamentarians alike on issues such as ID cards, Guantánamo and the environment is strikingly similar), and the media caricature of a split between 'economic' and 'social' liberals ignores the fact that this is a debate *within* liberalism. The Party undoubtedly possesses the brightest young talent in British politics, and it is imperative that Sir Menzies acts as a facilitator for demonstrating this generation's continuity with the Liberal tradition.

In his resignation speech, Charles Kennedy called for the Liberal Democrats to be "intellectually self-confident" and true to our "time-honoured, sound philosophic liberal principles". If the Party is to prosper, it must revive the spirit of 1906 – in word and deed, inspiration and aspiration. As Simon Hughes remarked at the Meet the Challenge conference,

Just as it was a century ago, this should be the Liberal hour...

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