

by Michael Meadowcroft

A party poster in the 1960s which had some success in the mortal combat against the wasted vote argument said, "If you think like a Liberal, vote like a Liberal." It was combined with a television appeal by Ludovic Kennedy for those who considered themselves to be Liberals to have the courage of their convictions on polling day, ending with the challenge, "if you don't - then you don't have much courage, do you?" Looking back on those far off and, in retrospect, curiously comfortable days, it was easier to think like a Liberal, whereas today, when Liberalism is under immense threat, a similar appeal would be considered far too risky for those, such as the Liberal Democrats, in "mainstream" politics. Opinion polling, tactical voting and perpetual Focus motion are the order of the day. It may deliver some seats, but it doesn't add to the health of democracy, measured, for instance, by voter turnout and party membership. Politics is not about winning a greater share of an ever diminishing number of votes.

The heart of the problem for Liberalism is that if it lacks a solid core of activists motivated by a passionate innate desire for liberty and a hatred of repression, fed philosophically and intellectually by those at the heart of a party purporting to espouse the cause, it will not have the resources to persuade the electorate to support Liberal policies at the polls. Compromise becomes the order of the day and the party bends too far to the prevailing wind.

Liberalism is not an easy philosophy. Two hundred years of emphasis on right and left has trapped politics into accepting economic determinism as if were written on tablets of stone and handed down from the mountain. To succeed, Liberalism has to challenge fundamentally this obsolete and dangerously superficial logframe, but every time that the political forces representing Liberalism are diluted, its intellectual rigour and clarity are diminished. For the natural Liberal every apparent truism has to be challenged and it is the realisation that one is doing this instinctively that marks the moment of truth for the individual - and the start of a life sentence. For a number of Liberals, the alliance with the SDP was a barely acceptable electoral arrangement and the merger between two incompatible philosophies was a compromise too far. The realisation that there were a number of colleagues of like mind led to the continuation of the Liberal Party.

Seventeen years later this may all now seem old hat but the Liberal shaped space in British politics gapes wider than ever and the lack of a formidable Liberal challenge leaves society at the mercy of the authoritarians and the false prophets who would be given very short shrift by any half-decent Liberal analysis and argument. The abuse of the terrorist threat to justify a police state is extraordinarily redolent of Weimar Germany, complete with a split between the political forces of Liberalism, fed partly by different views of compromise with the far right. The effort required to confront the increasing illiberal current killed the ailing Liberal leader, Gustave Stresemann, and this was a mortal blow to the Liberal cause.

Take three areas of Lib Dem failure today. First, no instinctive Liberal could ever support the installation of CCTV in public streets. Hackles rise every time one sees the cameras, and yet the Lib Dems brag that they have introduced them in their local authorities. The received truth, supported by Lib Dems is that we need more police and yet the reality is that we have far too many. Why? Because crime is prevented and detected by a confident and strong community, including through its links with locally based policing. Every demand for more police suggests that the police can do the entire job alone and undermines the partnership. We already have more police than ever in our history. Even over ID cards the Lib Dem opposition has been lukewarm and has been prepared to countenance a "purely voluntary identity card", which is arguably more dangerous.

Second, on the NHS the Lib Dems have fallen into the populist trap of focussing on waiting lists and on largely unjustified mass scanning, rather than on improving the health of the people by making the powerful case for shifting resources from glamorous and hugely expensive clinical practice to basic provision lower down the "chain".

Third, on Iraq the Lib Dems spoilt their initial opposition to the war by fudging the issue once the war started. The powerful continuing argument against the war was based on political judgement of the situation that would pertain after the war. The Lib Dems failed this test and concentrated on the issue of the lack of weapons of mass destruction.

There is still a Liberal Party, loyal but enfeebled, dogged but marginalised, and it watches with sorrow and frustration as another party with Liberal in its title has great opportunities and fails to take them.

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