

The result was that Liberal Democrats loved their leader but, insofar as they sensed his strategy, most wanted none of it. The 'what if' question must be how much more could have been achieved if all that time at the top and personal energy had been spent on something other than 'The Project'.

The dreams started at once. Only five days after becoming leader Ashdown met Tessa Blackstone and John Eatwell to talk about 'think tank' co-operation with Labour and the following April he and Richard Holme were talking about some sort of Lib-Lab 'Programme for Britain'.

Before 1992, discussion of working together in Parliament was about a hung Parliament. The day after polling day Ashdown held a strategy meeting and wrote 'We must make use of this opportunity to realign the left'. Three days later he was hoping to open a dialogue with Labour which 'will develop into a genuine partnership and perhaps even, in the long-term, an electoral pact'.

A position paper urged 'we should refrain from attacking [Labour] openly'. This and the Chard speech caused a furore among MPs and Chard set off a debate in the wider party. Ashdown got a tough reception at the ALDC conference in July and commented 'Why is it difficult to get people to see beyond the end of their noses?'

Ashdown had now started his campaign to abandon 'equidistance' (between the other two large parties). This fairly common sense idea nevertheless met resistance and took eighteen months to achieve. He was trying to take the party in directions it did not understand and about which it was often unhappy and usually hostile.

Contacts had been made with Labour figures such as Peter Mandelson and Robin Cook but John Smith was not interested and the idea of co-operation was going dead. Then a key event took place in July 1993 when the Ashdowns and the Blairs were brought together for dinner by Anthony Lester and clearly hit it off. A dinner followed at the Blairs when Ashdown was impressed by Blair's call for 'new ideas' based on 'community' and a 'new contract between the citizen and the

state', possibly his first introduction to the new communitarian vogue!

Realisation of the dreams became possible with the death of John Smith and his replacement by Blair. Ashdown sent a note urging him to stand and in August 1994 Blair initiated new contacts. Another dinner followed which set a pattern for the next three years. There was lots of enthusiasm for co-operation and circular talk around 'The Small Thing' (co-operating on issues) and the preferred 'Big Thing' – in September Ashdown first considered Labour and Liberal Democrats working together even if Labour had a majority.

The question of PR became the central problem. For almost three years over at least sixteen documented meetings Ashdown pushed Blair but Blair was 'not persuaded'. The process resulted in the Cook-Maclennan agreement: PR for the Scottish and Welsh devolution elections and PR for the 1999 European elections – but no more than the promise of a commission to look at an alternative system for Westminster followed by a referendum.

A small 'Jo Group' of close advisers was set up by Ashdown to advise, plan and control all relations with Labour on the Project. But for another thirty months it was Ashdown who was pushing these ideas amongst his close colleagues and the MPs and Jo Group who were pulling him back. Entry after entry shows his frustration with them and his feeling he is on his own. Yet he is driven to go on with it against almost all advice.

In October 1996, typically, Ashdown writes 'I am very exposed and with very few supporters of the project. But I am still determined to go ahead.' Earlier that

summer it was Richard Holme, no less, who told him to be wary of a 'film script that you have written in your head'.

In the end, by early 1997, it was Holme, the Jo Group itself and Archy Kirkwood as Chief Whip who pulled the plug on the most ambitious pre-election parts of the Project. Yet Blair and Ashdown still fantasised that they could suddenly spring a coalition on their parties after polling day. In the most bizarre entry of all Ashdown phones Blair from a college in Taunton on the afternoon of general election polling day to discuss prospects!

So the final 'what if?' must be – could Blair and Ashdown really have carried their parties in a coalition government in circumstances of an overall majority after 1 May 1997? It is obvious to me that at best Ashdown would have split down the middle the party which a few years earlier he had rescued from potential oblivion.

What is incontrovertible is that both leaders were engaged in an audacious but fundamentally flawed attempt to manoeuvre their parties into a wholly new long-term strategy without the slightest attempt to gain the prior consent of those parties or even to tell them what they were doing.

In the event the pre-election Project was fatally shackled by Blair's unwillingness or inability to deliver PR. We await the next instalment which deals with how they tried to revive the Project after the election. Meanwhile we need the breathing space to pick ourselves up off the floor.

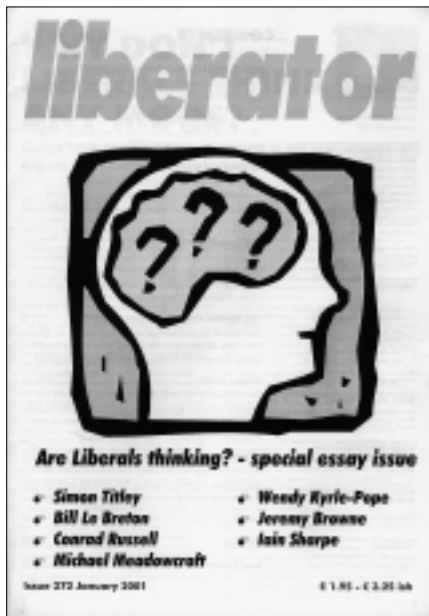
Tony Greaves is a Liberal Democrat peer. He has been a local government activist and leadership sceptic since the sixties.

Thirty years of *liberator*

Reviewed by John Smithson

Liberator's survival for thirty years is a wonderful achievement given the track record of all other vaguely similar Liberal publications. Its success has

been based on the hard work and dedication of a relatively small (but changing) group of individuals, together with its continuing distinctive



stance within the awkward, radical, argumentative wing of the Party. Its history can be divided into three phases – from its inception to the summer of 1976; to July 1978; and to the present time – based on its format, focus and controlling group rather than on any mere political events.

Its launch in 1970 was an exciting initiative during one of the more depressing periods of Liberal history. It accurately heralded itself as 'A NEWSPAPER OF THE YOUNG LIBERAL MOVEMENT' and by April 1971 could claim to have established itself as the monthly campaigning newspaper for Young Liberal ideas and action within and outside the Young Liberal Movement.

It acted as mouthpiece and communications channel for the YLs and helped them to be challenging both inside and outside the Party. Its content varied but it had the vibrancy and earnestness of the YLM at the time. There was much about the internal activities of the YLs as a body, together with articles on relevant issues and concerns of the period such as racism, South Africa, women's rights, community politics, the dual approach, industrial democracy, and there was even then the occasional book review. It spoke much of direct action but in reality there was not very much about campaigning in the active sense.

In the end, while it achieved notoriety and irritated a number of Party big-wigs into writing the

occasional letter, it was never perceived as any threat to the Party as a whole or inspiration for it to be challenged or changed. The campaign issues were seen to stem from the idealistic naivety of young people and had little relevance to much of the main body of the Party. Amazingly it fudged entirely the Thorpe crisis of 1976, suggesting it was either boring to YLs or that the alternatives to Thorpe as leader were even worse.

Despite its extremely close links with the YLM leadership *Liberator* was always (and still is) published independently by Liberator Publications. The name most closely associated with this period is Peter Hain, who infamously joined the Labour Party in September 1977. Hain was a continuing member of the group and the longest serving editor (from September 1973 until October 1975) during that time.

The next phase saw *Liberator* taken over by a Manchester collective and adopt a tabloid format. It was still very much a YLM newspaper but the change and the new format (which in effect doubled its size) did generate a surge in news about YL branches up and down the country while retaining all the other features. There was more about action and guidance for getting directly involved in campaigns. The masthead changed in January 1977 from the somewhat Victorian appearance of the YL eagle to a cartoon of somebody using a spray can (a symbol of direct action despite the adverse environmental overtones!) The whole presentation was also much livelier than the previous somewhat drab A4 format with full pages of text and relatively few breaks. However it must also be recalled that technology was changing and the inclusion of photos and artwork became much easier.

1976 to 1978 was very much a period of retrenchment for the Liberal Party as a whole as it recovered from the debacle of the Thorpe affair and later entered the Lib-Lab pact. *Liberator's* contribution was certainly significant at least so far as the YLs were concerned and it was commendably vociferous in demanding more out of Lib-Labbery.

Suddenly in August 1978 *Liberator* changed its format (and editorial board) entirely and declared itself to be a magazine. The new layout – twenty-four pages, A4 size, stapled – also meant a lot more content. There was much more about Liberal activity on local councils and local campaigning but the articles on specific issues together with the book reviews remained. It ceased to be just a YLM publication and set out to widen its appeal and its coverage. A clear coup was an interview with Alan Beith then, as now, Deputy Party Leader, in August 1979 and this was followed by further interviews including one with David Steel, Party Leader, in the Assembly issue of 1979. The magazine's circulation expanded significantly and the twenty-four-page format has more or less been maintained ever since, although Conference issues tend to be larger, with September 1998 reaching fifty-six pages.

These events coincided with *Liberator's* steadily increasing influence within the Party. Party big-wigs, such as President Elect Richard Holme (as he then was) and Paddy Ashdown MP (not then Party Leader) became willing to write articles for *Liberator*. There was almost a danger that it might become respectable but was saved this ignominy by the invention of its gossip supplement 'Liberator Insider' which thankfully developed into an effective defence. Its note on Joyce Arram, describing her most productive contribution as her knitting, 'which like her comments lacks any shape or coherence' gives the general flavour ...

Two further events strengthened *Liberator's* position in this respect: a negotiated take-over of the more or less moribund *Radical Bulletin* and the emergence of the SDP. The latter in particular enabled it to become a rallying point for many Liberals who were either nervous of, or totally opposed to, any deal with the SDP. The fact that a deal was made was of no consequence in this sense – many party members were concerned and upset and identified with *Liberator's* more purist line, so consolidating its position as the radical voice of the Party. The establishment of a 'Commentary'

editorial as an introduction to the magazine also enhanced its impact.

The collective also steadily became larger. From around six in September 1978, it grew to fifteen by April 1981 and reached twenty in 1988. This has clearly been, and remains, a great strength. There are people to write articles, to search out information and encourage others to do the same. The genuinely collective approach has worked and no doubt is one of the main reasons for its continuing success. Nevertheless it is worth pointing out that the vast bulk of all the people in the collective live within what could be fairly described as the London Region. This has led to the occasional blunder – e.g. the condemnation of regionalism within the Party as unwanted.

Throughout the period of the Alliance (from 1981 to the summer of 1987), *Liberator* was able to maintain a steady and persistent opposition to the whole idea. While it had long retained a suitably irreverent attitude to the Party's collective leadership, the Alliance brought out the best in it. Its points and arguments were largely irrefutable and it acted as a comfort zone for the many who continued to feel uncomfortable but were too idle or too cowardly to do anything about it. Undoubtedly this constancy consolidated its position and importance for Liberals as a whole.

Following the merger in January 1988 *Liberator* continued to follow a clear radical line. Describing David Steel's decision not to stand for the leadership of the newly merged party as 'the first bit of good news for months' is a typical comment of the time. A mark of its continuing status and deemed importance was the ease with which it could command both leadership candidates (Ashdown and Beith) to answer in detail a series of questions and publish the results.

The first two years following the merger were a dark and gloomy period in the history of Liberalism. Many radicals were totally disillusioned and confused about which way to turn. *Liberator's* role in this period was crucial: it contained articles from and about the SLD, the Liberal

Movement and the (continuing) Liberal Party, while at the same time managing never to take sides. It simply maintained its radical Liberal stance, supporting any such idea or initiative regardless of its source. The relative calm and progress that has followed and the fact that so many radicals stayed within the fold is due to many factors but *Liberator's* continuing faith and robust promotion of Liberal ideas and principles clearly helped.

For the last decade *Liberator's* overall quality and status and the affection for the magazine have not waned. It has now become an established part of the Liberal scene and has retained and refined its irreverent approach, which continues to make its impact to good effect on the Party's conscience. 'Lord Bonker's Diary' first appeared in June 1990 and still retains its satirical sharpness and relevance.

Liberator has continued to address the main issues of importance to Liberals. In 1993, as if to prove its Liberal pedigree, it got really excited over Liberal Democrat constitutional changes. It expressed outrage over the disastrous Tower Hamlets 'racist' fiasco and also encouraged the 'sogs' (Roger Liddle *et al*) to go back to Labour.

(They did.) *Liberator* has consistently supported Scottish and Welsh devolution but Paddy Ashdown's ever increasing love affair with Tony Blair (including the Cabinet Committee) was condemned from the start to Ashdown's demise. During the leadership election it remained neutral but opposed to Charles Kennedy. It covered positively the Annual Assembly of the (Meadowcroft) Liberal Party up until the last one in 1999.

So where now? The *Liberator* Collective is well established and includes new younger members as well as old established ones. *Liberator* appears regularly and is much appreciated by its subscribers and, I feel, by the Party as a whole. It has never been boring (at least not for long), has always been irreverent, and has generally risen to the occasion. With the other two main parties now both Conservative, its continuation is essential to ensure a radical outlet within a Liberal Democrat party that is still capable of forgetting its roots.

John Smithson edited Radical Bulletin from 1970 to 1976. He has been a councillor on various authorities for nearly thirty-five years.

A man of government

Robert Skidelsky: *John Maynard Keynes: Fighting for Britain 1937–46* (Macmillan, 2000; 580pp)

Reviewed by David Gowland

The publication of (Lord) Skidelsky's *John Maynard Keynes: Fighting for Britain 1937–46* marks the culmination of over thirty years of scholarship which began with *Politicians and the Slump* in 1967. It is important to examine the changes in attitudes to Keynes over this period and Skidelsky's role in this process.

In 1967, Keynes' reputation was at its peak and that of economics with it. Keynes was hailed as the man who had made full employment possible by

showing how demand management could enable governments to use activist economic policy to ensure lasting prosperity. But in 1968 Milton Friedman's Presidential address to the American Economic Association started a movement which has culminated in Gordon Brown's proclamation of the opposite of the post-war consensus:

The avoidance of inflation is now the only goal of economic policy. The Chancellor believes high employment