



The liberal “big idea” is choice and opportunity for all, says
JEREMY BROWNE

‘We now live in a liberal age’

LIBERALISM REGAINED

Political slogans rarely rise above the inoffensively mundane. Their spirit can normally be captured by deploying the words “Britain”, “Future”, “Opportunity” and “New” in random order.

And yet considerable thought goes into writing political slogans. Like an Olympic logo, they are easier to criticise than they are to devise. The skill is to capture the very essence of the party with only a handful of words. They are the most stripped-down, economical statement of values that exist in politics.

The Liberal Democrats have had many slogans. They have all sought to address the same question: what is the distinctive and relevant appeal of liberalism? For a party that is often accused by its detractors of lacking a clearly understood role, this is an important question to answer.

At the Liberal Democrat conference last year every delegate had the party slogan around their necks on the piece of material holding their voting badges. It said: “Trust in people. Make Britain fairer.”

Shortly before he ceased to be Prime Minister, Tony Blair predicted an increase in what he called political “cross-dressing”.

This has already happened to a considerable extent. New Labour, in response to four General Election failures, sought an accommodation with the Conservative policies that had defeated them. In office, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown further limited the Conservative scope for manoeuvre by appropriating opposition ideas that had the potential to be popular.

Now David Cameron, the self-styled “heir to Blair”, has adopted the same ideology-lite tactics. The upshot of this fashion for cross-dressing is a political system that lacks values, principles and firm moorings. The electorate sense the emptiness and opportunism.

The Liberal Democrats have made some progress in stamping our identity on the public consciousness. Our opposition to the Iraq War is well-known and widely admired. The party’s long-standing commitment to the environment is a popular feature of our appeal. Core liberal values on civil liberties and constitutional reform are generally understood and increasingly relevant.

So far, so good, but every political party stands and falls on its ability to propose a coherent blueprint for improving key public services. This is the main ideological, intellectual and electoral domestic battleground.

Ever since the rise of the Labour party in the first half of the twentieth century, liberals have struggled to find a core message with electoral resonance. We have had many good policies and many talented politicians. We have won many arguments, especially with regard to the personal liberty of the individual. But have we had “A Big Idea” in the way that socialism, for all its proven failings, is clearly “A Big Idea”?

The changing scope of the political debate presents us with that opportunity. Between the industrial revolution and the fall of the Berlin Wall, the big ideas in politics revolved around the competing cases for capitalism and socialism. These debates were the very essence of the post-war decades: trade union reform, secondary picketing, the closed-shop, prices and incomes policies, nationalisation, privatisation, the mixed-economy, corporatism, backing winners and accommodating both sides of industry.

This masculine, industrial politics evokes the faded colour of 1970s television. We now live in a very different age; a liberal age. That is why both Labour and the Conservatives, sensing that their core appeal is becoming increasingly obsolete, are so attracted to hasty reinvention.

There is a big idea which is central to the demands of our era and emphatically liberal. It will require the Liberal Democrats to have the boldness and confidence to promote it against the opposition of small-c conservatives and vested interests. It is not a brand new invention. It does not require us to compromise our liberalism; it only requires us to assert it.

It is the slogan worn by every conference delegate: "Trust in people. Make Britain fairer."

British society has changed so much: in the workplace, in the home and in our private lives. The internet, the freedom to travel and greater prosperity are liberating ever more people. They do not feel so bound by convention or stifled by conformity.

We have choices that previous generations would not have thought possible. Where we work, where we go on holiday, what we wear, what we watch on television, even what we eat. The one-size-fits-all, top-down, prescriptive society – where everyone can have whatever colour car they want so long as it is black – has long gone. Apart from in one area, where change has been slowest: our public services.

Only if you are rich enough can you truly choose which school your child should attend, either by paying for private education or moving house. Only if you are rich enough can you have a proper choice of when and where to have medical treatment.

The real liberal big idea, the one that strikes a chord with the demands of our time, is for those opportunities to be afforded to everyone. Every British citizen could be trusted and empowered to make free choices and exercise greater control over their own life. Not just the wealthy, but fairness for everyone, so nobody has to be a passive recipient of government largesse instead of having a greater say in the future of their own family and community.

That would mean the end of big, command-and-control government, with its cloying targets and regulation. It would mean the end of thinking that "The man in Whitehall knows best", or the man in the town hall, for that matter. People would no longer have things done to them; they would be given the responsibility and freedom to do things for themselves.

It is a big leap for the Liberal Democrats. It is a big leap for any British political party. But it will happen. And it is "A Big Idea". More specifically, it is "A Liberal Big Idea". We should not let the other political parties – as they wander the political battlefield seeking inspiration and relevance – seize the very concept that could make liberalism the dominant creed in British public life once again.

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