

# FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

TRINITY TERM 2024

‘WHY I’M A FAN OF GB NEWS’ - *Conor Boyle*

‘WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE BRITISH’- *Zaghram Farhan*

‘LABOUR, STEAL OUR IDEAS’ - *Heather Judge*

‘THE CASE FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT’ - *Aaron McIntyre*

AND MORE!!!!

OXFORD UNIVERSITY LIBERAL ASSOCIATION

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# THE PRESIDENT'S INTRODUCTION

Firstly, I must extend my sincerest thanks to everyone who participated in our Society in Trinity Term. Re-starting it, essentially from scratch, was always going to be a challenge - and though chaotic at times, I think our first term back was a resounding success. In Michaelmas, we aim to be bigger and better than before, and we'll need every one of you to make that happen.

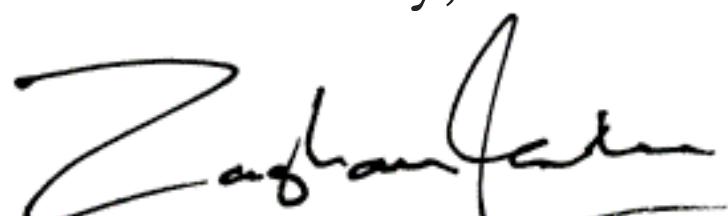
Those of you who came to our events last term will know that discussions across the aisle are of paramount importance to me, our democracy is predicated on the idea that we talk to each other, that we negotiate our differences with words and not swords.

In that spirit, this magazine hosts articles from across the political spectrum- whether that be members of OUCA, the Greens, the Labour Club or of course OULA Committee. It covers a wide range of topics, from the structure of our democracy to the future of LGBT politics. I hope that everyone will find something of interest in here. I must extend my thanks to everyone who contributed, in particular those who aren't members of our Committee.

The written word is a powerful tool - it has toppled empires and built new ones in their place. It has forged new nations, ideas and movements. Indeed, Liberalism is defined by a few great writers and a few simple words. I am pleased that we are able to play a small part in the continuation of writing, and the propagation of opinion in this great University.

I look forward to delivering a termcard to you soon, and I hope that you'll join us at the fantastic events that we have planned. For now, please enjoy **Freedom of the Press**, and do let me know what you think! If you find yourself disagreeing with the words written here, remember that immortal phrase '*I disapprove of what you say, but I'll defend to death your right to say it*'.

Yours Liberally,



Zagham Farhan - The President,  
University College.



# WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE PROUD TO BE BRITISH

**The President, University College**

My story isn't a unique one. My parents travelled to the UK shortly before I was born, choosing to brave moving across the world to try and pursue a better life for their future children, and in doing so, have served the NHS for 20 years. To be British means something very special to me. It's a fundamental part of who I am, and in almost every conceivable way that decision to get on a plane has defined my life.

My recent trip to the USA demonstrated what outward patriotism looks like- flags everywhere, the national anthem before baseball games and so on. British Patriotism, in the modern day at least, is not like that. Its more quiet, more understated, just more British. I firmly believe that we can be patriotic without feeling the need to put other nations down. That we can celebrate what it means to be British, without feeling the need to isolate ourselves or believe that we are singularly greater than everyone else. We can acknowledge our failures and celebrate our successes.

Unlike most Lib Dems, I was, and broadly remain, a Brexiteer. I was glad that the referendum brought out a little bit more pride in our nation, made us believe in ourselves a little more again. But sometimes it also meant demonising foreigners, running scare stories about Turkey and meaningless statements about how 'bulldog spirit' could see us through economic turmoil. That was of course wrong.

So here lies the distinction, and the challenge; can we celebrate ourselves without denigrating 'others', whoever they may be.

I firmly believe we can, that we can forge a new identity for our nation as internationalist, building deeper bonds with our European partners, looking to renew old ties with nations like Australia and Canada, and by being a bridge to the West to upcoming nations like India. All of this can be done while maintaining our identity.

I have many an issue with Starmer and his Government, but I like the way they've injected a little bit of patriotism back into our governance, without making it a gimmick. A well-placed Union Flag, or a well named public energy company goes a long way to undo this idea that we somehow ought to be ashamed of our country.

So, what does it mean to be British; to me its very simple Western values that have stood the test of time, and I hope will continue to do so. It's the fact that my parents were able to come here seeking opportunity and found it. It's the fact that we (broadly) care for everyone and that our state steps in when individuals can't. It's a country where everyone is welcome, so long as you play by the rules and contribute to our national missions. It's the nation that developed modern democracy, stopped the slave trade, defeated fascism. Those are things we can be proud of, while simultaneously understanding our numerous mistakes.

**"the nation that developed modern democracy, stopped the slave trade, defeated fascism"**



**“MY GRANDFATHER WAS BORN  
A SUBJECT OF THE EMPIRE...80  
YEARS LATER HIS GRANDSON  
STUDIES AT THE SAME  
INSTITUTION THAT MANY OF  
HIS COLONISERS WOULD HAVE  
GONE TO”**

I believe we should all be patriots – to live in modern Britain, for all its flaws, is still a great privilege. We have free schools, free healthcare, democracy, the rule of law, religious freedom, linguistic freedom, legal equality. These are all things I’m immensely proud of, and things that I wouldn’t necessarily have, had my parents not got on that plane. To be a patriot is not to believe that everything is perfect, in fact it’s often the exact opposite. A true patriot loves their country and thus always seeks to see it improve.

No matter your party or your politics, whether you want taxation to be 10% or 60%, you can believe in Britain and you can believe in making Britain better. In 1946, my Grandfather was born a subject of the Empire in British Ceylon. 80 years later, his grandson studies at the same institution that many of his colonisers would have gone to.

You can choose to view that as a stain on our history, or you can choose to believe that it represents a nation willing to change and to improve. I choose the latter, in the hope that we can move forward with a renewed vision. So next time you pass a Union Flag, I ask you to consider what it meant in the past but what it means in the present, and what it can mean to you in the future.

**Zaghram Farhan,**  
The President - *University College*.

# ABANDONED BY LABOUR: LABOUR'S SHIFT TO THE "CENTRE" CREATES NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR LIBERAL DEMOCRATS

## The Returning Officer, University College

Keir Starmer claims to have changed the Labour Party. I wholeheartedly agree with his assertion. Quite frankly, the Labour Party has changed for the worse. In effecting this change, Labour has created a valuable opportunity for other parties to take on the mantle of progressive, socially liberal politics—one that the Liberal Democrats could very well seize.

The Labour Party has become unrecognizable, and not in a good way, as it moves to the “centre.” In the last election, the Labour Party somehow promised less new spending than the Tories. Recently, senior Labour figures refused to condemn as racist J.D. Vance’s comment that Britain has become “Islamist”. Instead, these comments are simply “controversial.” Crucially, as this is the topic of this article, the Labour Party has abandoned the LGBTQ+ community.

This shift to the centre provides a valuable opportunity for Liberal Democrats and other progressives to fill in the gap of political space created by Labour. In this article, I call on the party to demonstrate its commitment to the LGBTQ+ community, as Labour turns its back on it. I explain Labour’s abandonment of the community, briefly address substantive policy issues, and explain how the Liberal Democrats can take on the role of progressive champion that Labour gives up.



### Labour's abandonment of LGBTQ+ people

For many, Labour throwing LGBTQ+ people under the bus was marked by Wes Streeting’s decision to permanently keep the Tories’ politically motivated ban on puberty blockers. However, this decision was hardly a shock. Anyone who feigns surprise at this decision has been willfully blind or living under a rock.

During the election campaign and prior, Labour had been walking back any support it had afforded to trans people. It dropped its promise to implement self-identification. Starmer repeated transphobic nonsense that trans rights somehow conflict with women’s rights. Despite what he says about trans women being women, he has said during the campaign that he would ban trans women from entering single-sex NHS wards. This comment shows that Labour has capitulated to transphobes who portray innocent trans women as a threat. The Labour Party is even consulting these transphobes and others, including J.K. Rowling, who the now Chancellor has agreed to meet to consult on trans issues. Rowling’s only qualifications are being rich, referring to the transgender community as a “trans Taliban,” claiming that being transgender can be “cured,” and referring to a trans Labour councillor as a “man dressed as a woman.” Meanwhile, Streeting himself refuses to say explicitly that trans women are women and that trans men are men.

Starmer also declared that “gender ideology” should not be taught in school. I serve as co-chair of the LGBTQ+ Campaign and would appreciate it if the Prime Minister could enlighten me on what “gender ideology” consists of because I have no clue.

Once again, this is a case of Labour actively pandering to transphobes. “Gender ideology” is this decade’s version of the “gay agenda.”

At a certain point, it becomes clear that the fire cannot be put out from inside the house. LGBT Labour’s response to Wes Streeting’s ban on puberty blockers was abysmal. It did not even challenge the ban nor condemn it, arguing that they have to work within the confines of the Labour Party’s transphobic manifesto pledge to implement the Cass Review. If that is the case, then the fire must now be extinguished from outside the house.

Accordingly, the Labour Party now actively alienates LGBTQ+ supporters and other groups as part of its shift to the political centre. As a result, Labour leaves behind a group of voters eager for alternatives. I fall into the group that the Labour Party has left behind and it is voters like me that Liberal Democrats can appeal to.

### A side note—the Cass Review

The Cass Review was used as justification by Wes Streeting for his latest attack on the LGBTQ+ community. Its implementation was even promised in the Labour manifesto. However, the Cass Review is flawed in many ways.

The Cass Review appointments were firstly political. Kemi Badenoch stated that the Tory government had expressly appointed “gender-critical men and women” in roles related to equalities and health. The report also attracted criticisms from many groups and peer-reviewed publications, most notably a group of researchers from Yale. For the sake of brevity, I will refrain from addressing the specific flaws of the Cass Review but I would encourage interested readers to examine them.

It makes no sense for the Labour government to adhere to the Cass Review and promote it, given its flaws and the fact it actively harms the LGBTQ+ community.

The Cass Review does not even call for a ban on puberty blockers. Additionally, the one study that the Cass Review classifies as “high quality” evidence found that puberty blockers lead to better mental health outcomes. Puberty blockers were already the “compromise” solution. A medical treatment that could limit gender dysphoria and is relatively reversible as opposed to other treatments (i.e. hormone therapy). Quite evidently, Labour has turned its back on the LGBTQ+ community.

### A New Opportunity

Given that Labour turned its back on LGBTQ+ people and others, parties like the Liberal Democrats can expand their appeal and provide the support that these communities need. In many cases, Liberal Democrat policy is already aligned with voters left behind by Labour. As such, it is merely a matter of promoting existing policies and more explicitly delineating positions that the party already holds.

This approach also does not only apply to LGBTQ+ issues. Labour has equally abandoned many voters over Palestinian and fiscal issues. The party uses wishy-washy language to address the atrocities that Israel commits in Gaza and its violations of international law in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Further, Labour promises little new investment in government services, epitomized by its refusal to scrap the two-child benefit cap.

As Labour continues chasing the political “centre” and appears on track to continue doing so given the rise of Reform, Liberal Democrats have a valuable opportunity to fill in the gap of political space created, cater to disaffected Labour supporters, demonstrate where beliefs overlap and, advance progress for all communities.

**Julian Wang,**  
The Returning Officer - *University College.*

# A KEEN NEWS-WATCHER'S PERSPECTIVE: WHY I'M A FAN OF GB NEWS

Conor Boyle

Since I was probably ten or eleven years of age, I have been a prolific consumer of television news. It was probably, in many ways, the gateway drug that turned me into a political anorak. I was obsessed originally with the studios, the formats, the graphics, the presenter line-ups of different television channels. This interest was, of course, superficial to begin with. Over the years however, this has developed into a more serious, and substantive, interest in the media landscape.

Looking back, I would be hard-pressed to praise much of the BBC's 'news' and current affairs output. But in fairness, I once considered the BBC to be professional and serious, with a way of presenting their news that was spot-on. Their news presenters - Jane Hill, Sophie Raworth, Simon McCoy, etc. - could give news to camera in a sincere way, and in such a way that could handle breaking news stories in a brilliant manner. Not only that, but they could tailor their output well. Politics was brought to us by a well-made telly duo of Andrew Neil and Jo Coburn at lunchtime, and Evan Davis (and, yes Kirsty Wark and Emily Maitlis) at night time. The mid-mornings saw a serving of soft-news with the incredibly personable Victoria Derbyshire, and the presenters of the big bulletins at 6- and 10-o'clock were beamed into our homes by trusted names of Clive Myrie, Fiona Bruce and Huw Edwards.

Now, I'm not saying the BBC was perfect. It still had the problem of there being no sense of community or family within it. With the exception of Carol; the BBC Breakfast meteorologist; there was no sense of warmth, and they had different presenters in the same time-slots for different days. This is something of a cardinal sin. But, comparing this with Sky News, which for many years was its only 24-hour competitor, it was leaps and bounds ahead. Sky, under the stewardship of Adam Boulton, was trying too hard to be an American channel.

The over-use of dramatic moments and sounds, and trying to give a sense to viewers that this tiny station was a global mammoth outlet. The BBC has, along with Sky (and the rest) gone, in my view, mad over the last few years. Brexit, the pandemic, Trump, Boris has sent them into a tail of derangement, and their disdain for mass swathes of the public is clear as day. The sneering from Jon Sopel, Emily Maitlis, Kirsty Wark, Kay Burley and so many others has been difficult to watch.

**"Opinion has long snuck into the so-called "impartial" broadcasters"**

It's often very nasty. Crucially, the pretence of impartiality has been blown wide-open. It has become so clear to me that it's just not appropriate, realistic or necessary. Bias exists, it's just that the BBC and Sky refuse to admit theirs.

This is why, for all their many faults, I think there is a place for GB News. Adam Boulton was right to say they disrupt the "delicate ecology" of British broadcasting. And thank goodness they do. It was ironic though to see a BBC Newsnight panel discussing how GB News' biases with all panelist's being in total agreement that the station should be shut-down. Don't get me wrong, I cringed at some of the teething problems that GB News faced. The prolonged silences after presenters signed off for an ad-break, the bad-lighting, mid-spelling and even getting the wrong guest's name, was often painful to watch. However, its content is what I am talking about.

GB News provides a radically different perspective on news. As such, it adds balance to a metropolitan, London-centric, upper-middle class, liberal worldview of other broadcasters. GB News has been helpful in raising the genuine voices of the North and Midlands of England, and I may say, Northern Irish voices. And they broach topics that many people are talking about, worrying about and wondering about, but that would make the BBC clutch their pearls. That is incredibly important. Because the silencing of these voices and demeaning those who genuinely espouse them will lead many, particularly, working-class people to defect from politics and civic life. Bringing these views into the mainstream means that people don't become radicalised and turn to extreme outlets to vent their grievances. Somehow, its critics are content to allow this; because these people are "gammons" and have "unsophisticated" takes not grounded in a philosophy degree from a university.

In addition to adding its conservative editorial stance to the macro broadcasting market, within a micro sense, GB's reporting and straight-news side is as good, if not better, than the other offerings. Stephen Dixon, Eamonn Holmes, Anne Diamond, Isabel Webster and Ellie Costello are among their non-opinion hosts who are quality broadcasters.

In addition to this, the left-wing voices on GB News are more authentic than much of the supposed 'conservative' commentators on Sky or the BBC. Paul Emberry is a trades unionist and author on class, Matthew Lanza is a former Labour adviser, Bill Rammell, Geoff Hoon and Dennis McShane were ministers in the New Labour governments, and Gloria De Piero, who hosts her own show, was a Labour MP until 2019.

In this, I must add, Liam Halligan's analysis as their Economics Editor was sublime. He gave objective takes on interest rates, the housing market, tax and spending, and other areas, and his ability to present these seemingly complex concepts into understandable, digestible portions for his former "On the Money" was impressive. I suppose, however, that making economic literacy more widely available to the masses would be considered uncouth by Sky's Ed Conway and the BBC's Faisal Islam. As for those who object to MPs having their own shows, or to opinion hosts; I would say that MPs have long been newspaper columnists, and newspapers have long had editorial opinion sections.

Similarly, I would heavily suggest that the fact that Kay Burley and Beth Rigby continue to be big presences on Sky, Krishnan Guru-Murthy and Cathy Newman on Channel 4, and Nick Robinson and Nicky Campbell on the BBC (not forgetting that Emily Maitlis and James O'Brien both made great use of the Newsnight monologue when they hosted that show) are proof that opinion has long snuck into the so-called "impartial" broadcasters.

GB News is just honest and upfront about it. One last word, though, on the newspapers. The opinion elements have long existed there, and the same people who criticise opinion television have often never advocated the abolition of opinion columns. Again, I cannot help but feel class is at-play here too.

There is a perception, correctly or not, that newspaper audiences are a bit more highbrow than television, and thus the well-educated middle-classes can load themselves up with Times' and Guardian columns, but television viewers (or those without the means to buy newspapers regularly - on top of paying the TV TAX) shouldn't get the same benefit of having someone articulate their views in public.

GB News is here to stay, despite the doubters and detractors; and it's no bad thing.

**Conor Boyle,**  
Ex Political Officer - Oxford University  
Conservative Association,  
*The Queen's College.*



# 'STEAL OUR IDEAS'

## The Vice President Emeritus, The Queen's College

"Steal our ideas." This is what Ed Davey implored to Keir Starmer, after Labour adopted the Liberal Democrat windfall tax on big oil and gas companies. In the first month of Starmer's new government, it has become apparent that it would be beneficial to the electorate for him to do exactly that - to put his pride in his 'massive mandate' aside and co-operate on policy. This is especially pertinent as Labour won only 34% of the vote share, 34% of a meagre 60% turnout. This means only 22% of the eligible electorate voted for Starmer's government - so it really should listen to the other voices in Parliament, who are representatives of a much wider proportion of the UK.

Unfortunately, the future does not look bright for Starmer 'stealing our ideas'. This is epitomised by the two-child benefit cap debacle that saw the first hiccup in his regime. Seven Labour MPs had the whip suspended over backing SNP (and later Lib Dem) proposed amendments to the King's Speech to abolish the two-child benefit cap introduced by George Osborne during austerity. One of the seven was senior back-bencher John McDonnell, who lamented that the vote against his new government was "a plea against child poverty". The cap itself is profoundly problematic: more than 4 million children in the UK live in relative poverty, and more than 1.5 million of them are affected by the cap. Starmer defended his position by promising a commission to review child poverty, but delaying the scrap can only be seen as dangerous politicking with young, vulnerable people's lives. This undeniably is delaying, not denying, the scrap of the cap: Starmer admitted the cap would be part of the review on child poverty, and there is a quiet consensus among Labour that this cap will be removed - but on Starmer's terms. Delaying for no other reason than what John McDonnell calls "authoritarian control freakery" is abhorrent, considering that according to The Guardian, merely removing the cap would lift 300,000 children out of poverty.



The suspension of the whip by Starmer on such a morally dubious issue is also profoundly concerning to those of us who hoped for cooperation after the olive-branch-extending policy of the Liberal Democrats. Davey's desire for a "cross-party solution" to social care would allow the free share of ideas, such as creating a Royal College of Care Workers. This could bring more legitimacy to the vocation, and would surely be a positive move towards fixing our broken health care system, especially after professional bodies such as the Royal College of Nursing said the King's Speech did not go far enough. Unfortunately, Starmer has used issues such as child poverty to galvanise a position of political strength, rather than real change.

**"IT IS SHAMEFUL THAT  
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Child poverty was a useful tool for him in opposition to appear empathetic - when he said the cap should be abolished - and now is a useful tool for him to seem 'responsible' on the economy with his hands tied. This was seen in action with Rachel Reeves' rhetoric attempts to illustrate a fiscally responsible, paternal government, with finances left by the Tories in a 'worse state' than expected, and 'difficult decisions' needing to be made; evoking Liam Byrne's 'there's no money left.' This desperate desire to appear tight with the purse strings is at the expense of young people in distressing and demoralising conditions. The new opposition weaponized this situation in the same way Starmer did, with Barverman saying "I believe this cap is aggravating child poverty, and it's time for it to go," despite voting for a reduction in welfare benefits for 80% of her time in Parliament.

It is shameful that social issues such as child poverty have been reduced to political punching bags used to demonstrate that their party is more pragmatic and 'sensible' than every other party, without anything actually being done. It is also shameful that Starmer cares more about proving he has the control of all his MPs and the partisan narrative of the King's Speech than accepting suggestions from outside of his party which could help remove children from unacceptable conditions.

I, like Ed Davey, call on Starmer to remember that it is not *who* tables amendments, legislation, or suggests policies that matters, but the *good* those policies can do.

**Heather Judge,**  
The Vice President Emeritus - *The Queen's College.*

# LABOUR AND THE CONSERVATIVES TREAT BRITONS LIKE BABIES. IT'S THE JOB OF THIRD PARTIES TO STAND UP TO THIS

Morwenna Stinchcombe

If I have one flaw, it's that I, Lee Anderson, George Galloway, and Liz Truss could share a cup of tea and bond over our distaste for the incoming Tobacco and Vapes Bill. After all, these are people whose ideologies find their foundation in chauvinism, crankery, and somehow also the Oxford Uni Liberal Democrats.

I mean no ill will to you: you have permitted me to write in your fine magazine, and as a fellow third-party enjoyer (specifically, the Greens), I shared in your smiles to see more constituencies break from the Labour-Conservative false dichotomy. Yet, now that 70+ constituencies and over 5 million voters have placed us in their confidence, we must repay them. By treating them as adults.

One would hope, naturally, that with the prattling on about 'Change' which dominated the Labour Party campaign, there would also be a noticeable swing away from the petty authoritarianism which defined previous Conservative governments. An end to the severe treatment of peaceful protesters. An end to deciding that no Brit born after 2009 will be too foolish to decide what goes into their body. However, the commitment to maintaining the latter policy, as laid out in the King's Speech this week, lets us into the bare facts of this Labour government: they are no social liberals.

Perhaps I should not be hectoring the Lib Dems on smoking: after all, your party leader compared smoking to skunk, which he would want strictly regulated, and referenced his parents' deaths from cancer as reasons for personal concern over the legality of tobacco products. He admits, bravely, that this is difficult for him as a liberal. It was difficult, too, for Caroline Lucas, my party's sole MP at the time, who abstained from the vote, presumably weighing out her own concern for people's health with her concern that the War on Drugs has been an abysmal, openly racist, classist and ageist failure.

I would like to call on our new slew of third-party MPs to be braver on all matters of personal autonomy. The Conservative Party stripped puberty blockers from young trans people, which Wes Streeting plans to continue. The Conservative Party stripped the option to pollute one's body if one so chooses from young people, and Labour will continue with this.

The Conservative Party, fortunately, was not Thick of It –adjacent enough to decide that young people need to be supervised in tooth-brushing.

What our two third parties can therefore offer the electorate is a solid promise that how one uses their body will remain down to the individual first and foremost. If you choose to smoke, drink, commit suicide, use puberty blockers, cannabis or heroin, the support and help to escape such vicious cycles ought to be available, but the criminalisation of the acts themselves will lead only to pain and chaos, as the histories of the criminalisation of suicide, the War on Drugs, and Prohibition have taught us. The Conservatives and Labour do not believe that individuals have the right to use their body as they so choose. Their offering so far is that the human body becomes property of the state.

These are points apart from the reality of smoking in Britain: it is frowned upon by GPs (leading to my explanation to one GP that "As long as I can off myself if the pain is too much, cancer is no concern") and taxed rigorously, at 16.5% of the retail price plus £6.33 on a packet of 20. Most of the cost of your average pack of ciggies is the tax. I am a fairly restrained smoker, yet the state still receives c. £150 from me each year. This money bolsters our state, and to a lesser extent, can help to bolster our NHS. Equally, with the tax on my beloved cigarettes, me and millions of smokers give back to the state more than we cost, according to some estimates. When you balance this against the possibility of some of those born in or after 2009 still smoking, and possibly attracted to it by how it has become illicit, it seems wiser that these people, come 2027, pay their fair share via over-the-counter cigarettes for what they choose to do.

There is some irony in the act of voting, a rite of passage for young politicos, becoming the act of undoing one's adulthood. If we trust the 5 million who voted for us to be mature enough to make a wise decision in the ballot box, we ought to entrust them in return with responsibility to be mature about their health.

**Morwenna Stinchcombe,**  
Former Co Chair - Oxford Student Greens,  
*Magdalen College.*

# A PATH FOR THE UK CONSTITUTION

The Treasurer, Mansfield College

A great myth has become the all defining narrative for the UK General Election: that the Conservative Party and its MPs are a bunch of uniquely immoral and incompetent people. Great swathes of constituency seats were lost and won solely on account of this myth alone, despite widespread apathy towards Labour. And so, yet again, another opportunity for systemic change was wasted.

The now stark problems this country faces aren't the fault of any one individual, one event or one political party. Boris Johnson, Liz Truss, Brexit, were all wobbles in a decades-long process of profound and widespread national atrophy. To self-righteously blame a body of individuals for this decay is to fuel a futile, divisive discourse and – worse still – to make it impossible to solve the problem. This article considers a question strikingly absent from national political debate: how can we reform our institutions to improve our country's trajectory?

The great strength of the UK constitutional set-up is that this process does not need to be sudden, drastic, or initiated by twelve different referenda. We don't need to have a revolution – except occasionally, to execute the King – and we don't need to start over every time change is needed. The gradual, mass expansion of the franchise throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries – driven by the Liberal party – attests to the possibility of wholesale reform within this British framework. Indeed, had David Cameron not so adeptly exploited the Liberal Democrats in coalition, this tradition of sensible reform would have continued: with AV and an elected House of Lords. Here I propose three further reforms, which would greatly strengthen our political system without fundamentally changing its character.



## Devolve power to Local Regions in the UK

The UK is one of the most centralised democracies in the world. This is not in itself a reason for change, but it ought to give us pause. It is remarkable though, given the triumph of the 'Take Back Control' slogan and a now universal disdain towards Westminster, that English devolution is not on the table. The set-up for this devolution already exists in the two-tier authorities established in the 1972 Local Government Act, all that remains is to devolve further powers. There are a great many reasons to support English devolution, I will propose a few.

The first is a point of principle, government tends to be more legitimate when it is closer to citizens. The schools or hospitals in Oxfordshire don't affect people in Cumbria, so why not let the people of Oxfordshire have the sole power over their own affairs? This devolution of powers would also allow the true fulfilment of the popular, essential levelling-up agenda promised by Boris Johnson: areas which feel left behind by Westminster would be able to implement their own development plans. Hopefully, some regions would find successful policy tools, which could then be learned from by others.

Local politics would suddenly matter again, and the management of services in London, Somerset and Shropshire wouldn't hinge on Westminster elections. The unbalanced, quasi-devolution system left by Blair could be stabilized and the Union would make sense again. In many ways, this would represent a conservative return to the system of local government eroded by successive Labour and Tory Prime Ministers since 1945.

## House of Lords Reform

Support for House of Lords reform is widespread – effectively all polling shows massive support for reform – and justified, given its continued failure to provide a counterweight to the Commons. Now, in perhaps the greatest ever feat of self-imposed national humiliation, a former KGB agent sits among 800 or so others in the House of Lords, courtesy of Boris Johnson.

**“INDEED, HAD DAVID CAMERON NOT SO ADEPTLY EXPLOITED THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATS IN COALITION, THIS TRADITION OF SENSIBLE REFORM WOULD HAVE CONTINUED”**

In a system of parliamentary sovereignty like ours, there is almost no oversight over the actions of a government with a strong majority. The House of Lords' lack of legitimacy and institutional impotence – being only able to delay bills for one year – allows a strong Prime Minister to exercise near-dictatorial authority without hindrance. The situation was not always so lopsided. Prior to reform throughout the 20th century, the Lords often blocked legislation and provided an effective counterbalance to the commons; ministers and even Prime Ministers sat in the Lords. Whilst Lords reform in the 20th century was a success for democracy, we failed to adequately replace the important role it had been playing.

To end this situation, the Lords ought to be half appointed by regional governments and half by leading experts, appointed by an independent body. Its powers need to be increased towards a position of genuine bicameralism, and its size needs to be reduced to something more sensible.

#### **Electoral Reform**

First Past the Post voting is not fit for purpose in a modern democracy. The results it produces rarely reflect the actual vote shares across the country. Safe seats allow second-rate party hacks to be parachuted into constituencies they know little about. Voting is rendered a pointless exercise in all but a handful of seats across the country, and the majority of people don't have an MP who represents their interests.

The single transferable vote would represent a clear improvement. I won't explain the system fully here, but it maintains constituency seats, promotes more proportional results, and supports independent candidates.

Constituencies, which are currently constructed on arbitrary boundaries, would be enlarged and represent an actual region or community, whilst the majority of people would have a local MP who they voted for. By ending the antidemocratic farce of artificial supermajorities, it would promote consensus-seeking and end divisive politics.

If successfully implemented, these systemic changes would empower our democratic institutions and improve our national trajectory. Rather than adopting a self-righteous approach, we must reform our constitution to promote better government and policymaking for our long-term future.

**Will Lawson,**  
The Treasurer - *Mansfield College*.

# THE HIDDEN NANNY STATE BEHIND YOUR FILM CHOICES

Alex Elliot

The film *Grotesque* is not my cup of tea. I will spare you the horrors of the plot, but any film which has the sentence “drives nails into his scrotum” in its Wikipedia page is not going to be an easy watch. In short, in this golden age of media availability, I would not choose this film.

This choice, though, has been made for me. The British Board of Film Classification refused to give the film a rating, claiming its release would “involve risk of harm”. Therefore, it is illegal for any shop in the UK to offer this film for sale; an admittedly sickening film by most people’s standards, but a work of fiction. No person was actually harmed in the making, and most people would at least give a cursory glance to the back of the DVD case before deciding on watching it. If someone thought they would be harmed by viewing it, they (like me) could simply select a more wholesome film. Unless someone forces another to watch the film against their will, absolutely no one is harmed by offering *Grotesque* for purchase. What makes it even more absurd is that the film is readily available on streaming services. Is the “risk of harm” solely present when the 1s and 0s are read by a laser, rather than transmitted by Wi-Fi?

A total of 87 works have been refused classification by the BBFC. A good few of them are sensible – I doubt even the most liberal of us would consider a compilation of hidden camera footage in men’s changing rooms suitable for sale – but the vast majority are fictional works which would pose no harm should they be released. I’m sure those of a more squeamish disposition – I hold my hand up to this – would suffer should they watch them.

**“Preferences differ, and as long as no one is harmed, we should respect each person’s right to fulfil them”**

But, they may also suffer, for example, should they watch *Strictly Come Dancing*, eat salt and vinegar crisps, or read this article. Preferences differ, and as long as no one is harmed, we should respect each person’s right to fulfil them, even if it involves watching 1 hour and 13 minutes of simulated torture.

Perhaps the most absurd example of the BBFC’s overreach in recent years is with the case of *Human Centipede 2*. It was first refused classification entirely, as it was deemed to “deprave or corrupt” viewers. I challenge you, dear reader, to find a single person who, after voluntarily watching a film about a mad car park attendant stitching together the digestive tracts of victims, would be even more depraved or corrupted as a result of the experience.

Equally, I challenge you to find a single mentally sound person who, after watching the film, would attempt something similar. The BBFC refused classification of the film in order to prevent a hypothetical individual who wouldn’t baulk at the plot description from potentially being “corrupted”.

If that wasn't unreasonable enough, after pleadings from the director, the BBFC let the film pass with an 18 rating, but only if 32 cuts were made. Ignoring the implications behind an organ of the state censoring art, the central concept of the film remained. Why would a film which was previously able to corrupt anyone that laid their eyes on it be saved by a few shots being removed?

The whole saga of Human Centipede 2 reveals the core issue with the UK's media laws. Rather than sticking to the remit of foreign classification bodies – preventing children accessing age-inappropriate content and ensuring the production of the film itself did not cause any harm – it is instead trying to apply a moral code which is unsuited for the modern day. Thatcher's Video Recordings Act was a much-needed piece of legislation, insofar as it created a rigorous age classification scheme. But, its ability to refuse classification is derived from the Obscene Publications Act, passed at a time when two men kissing was still thought of as "depraved". Society is far more liberal than it was in 1959, and yet what is and is not legal to watch is determined by the moral standards of a few government employees. The BBFC in its current form is the last vestige of the post-war consensus nanny state. I would never dream of taking away access to a work of fiction, no matter how depraved I believed it to be, and yet the government is paying people to do just that.

Perhaps it is also necessary now to discuss the issue of "copycat crimes". This rests on the idea that, having seen a piece of media depicting a violent act, someone may go on to attempt the same. Firstly, this ignores the vast number of horrific acts which have no basis in works of fiction – I doubt most murders get their ideas from back episodes of Death in Paradise. Secondly, and perhaps more substantively, there is no conclusive link between viewing media and enacting what was seen in it, outside of very young children.

Section 63 of the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008, which criminalises viewing "extreme" pornography, was introduced after what was thought to be such a crime. But, the murderer had a history of mental illness, having been referred to psychiatrists long before the internet had been invented. Any person who copies what crimes they see in media is not going to be in the best state mentally, and I posit would have carried out these crimes with or without access to such depictions. The danger of copycat crimes is a non-issue with regards to media censorship.

On a final point on extreme pornography, Section 63 did not criminalise extreme sexual acts themselves; only distributing videos with them in. Bizarrely, therefore, it remains perfectly legal to engage in BDSM, but not to do so on camera.

The aim of this article is not to convince you of the merits of Grotesque, Human Centipede 2, or other works in a similar vein. I would not seek these pieces of media out, and I would question associating with those who do. However, the choice not to view them, in a liberal society, should be mine and mine alone, not the decision of unelected government workers. The role of the BBFC, and of legislation governing media, should be to prevent children (who actually are harmed by watching fictional works) from watching inappropriate content, and to prevent works which depict actual, unsimulated harm from being sold. The remit of the BBFC needs to move away from moral judgements on what is and is not depraved – Britain deserves true media choice. So go out and buy Murder-Sets-Pieces, Mikey, and The Bunny Game – just don't expect me to watch them with you.

**Alex Elliott,**  
Ex Secretary - Oxford University  
Conservative Association,  
*Brasenose College.*

# IT'S TIME TO TURN BACK TO HELP A WORLD IN NEED – THE CASE FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Aaron McIntyre

In 1997 the last Labour government swept to power, and among the calls of ‘education, education, education’ and sweeping reforms to the then, and strangely enough now, crumbling NHS, the Department for International Development (DFID) was established early in Blair’s premiership in May 1997. With such a mess to take care of domestically, left by eighteen years of Conservative rule that had pushed public services to near-collapse, it is hardly surprising that the opening of a new department dedicated to delivering aid to those most in need around the world failed to christen the front pages of Murdoch’s empire.

However, the work DFID carried out should not be downplayed. It has been active in developing countries around the world. Whether that was helping rural farmers in Nepal, providing flood relief in Pakistan, or furthering the campaign to eradicate HIV/AIDS, the UK sought to take a leading role in saving lives, and making them more sustainable. All of these programmes, and the countless others undertaken under the brand of ‘UK aid: from the British people’ ensured that in many parts of the world, not only were people safe, but also that they could begin to rebuild their lives following the most abhorrent disasters. Britain had correctly identified that there was a moral case for helping our fellow human beings, and that principle had been taken to those most in need.

Like many friends, I spent a few weeks this summer doing an internship. Rather than taking a position at a bank, or perhaps following the hordes into a first taste of consultancy, the day after the general election I took off from Heathrow for the far throngs of east Africa.

**“THIS MORE THAN MANY, WAS AN EXAMPLE OF GOVERNMENT SPENDING CUTS COSTING LIVES”**

What I was met with was the most welcoming people imaginable, great food, and the most incredible music, alongside some of the direst poverty, stagnating rates of HIV, and classrooms designed to house thirty squeezing in fifty to sixty. This is a region where the work of international development could be best utilised; consecutive droughts alongside sporadic conflict across many states have left millions in need of humanitarian aid. However, cost-cutting proved that the previous government was, like in so many areas of policy, willing to turn its back on the world. This, more than many, was an example of government spending cuts costing lives.

However, cuts haven’t been the only downfall of DFID. I won’t deny that Labour makes a habit of establishing new government departments. Not only did Blair open DFID in its own right, but he also took some of the burden from the Home Office in creating the Ministry of Justice. Yet, the opening of these departments made clear that their mandates were so important that it shouldn’t simply be relegated to a back corridor of another department of state; these new departments mattered then, and they should certainly matter now. Therefore, it was a travesty when in 2020 the Conservative government under Boris Johnson merged DFID into what is now the Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (rolls off the tongue, doesn’t it), and again the idea of foreign aid was put on the back burner.

Now, we find ourselves in harsher times than 1997; Oasis aren't active anymore, we've got openly far-right MPs in Parliament, and the very existence of the world as we know it has never looked so precarious. There does appear a tempting argument to, like the last Conservative government, ignore the importance of international development, but I believe it isn't doom and gloom any longer.

Under the last Labour government, Britain was a world leader in foreign development, and I believe again that Labour will put Britain back on the map as a driver of progressive and sustainable change for a new post-Covid era. It's certainly time to put international development at the heart of the agenda, and perhaps it's time to open the doors to DFID itself once more?

**Aaron McIntyre,**  
Ex Co-Chair - Oxford Labour Club,  
*Magdalen College.*



The newly appointed Foreign Secretary David Lammy is seeking to introduce a new approach to international development, with the Labour manifesto promising to, 'rebuild Britain's reputation on international development with a new approach based on genuine respect,' alongside foreign policy aims, 'to tackle global poverty, instability, and the climate and nature crisis.' That hits the nail on the head. Britain should be proud of the reputation it developed through DFID, but the new government is acutely aware of the very different circumstances in which the world finds itself compared to the days of the Spice Girls.

# IN DEFENCE OF NICK CLEGG

Jan Maciejewski

Even amongst Liberal Democrats, defending Nick Clegg is an odd hill to die on. The coalition government which he formed with David Cameron is perceived as a blight on our past. It's been critiqued as political opportunism, a U-turning on manifesto promises for the taste of power. It's a powerful narrative and one which few Lib Dems try and dispel. However, given that he led our party into government, we owe it to Clegg to do so.

It's important to dispel the narrative that the coalition government was politically opportunistic. The 2010 election results meant that though the Conservatives hadn't won the election outright, the Labour Party did lose it. However, without enough seats for a Tory majority, the question of the next Prime Minister was unresolved. This inconclusive arithmetic was even more undesirable given the economic context – a recession precipitated by the 2008 financial crash, and a Greek bail-out supported by the European Union. With no clear electoral victor, shares fell 'like a stone' as the FTSE-500 index closed 138 points down. Delays in forming a government exacerbated market distrust.

Since the Conservatives had won the most seats, they had the democratic mandate to govern. Though the Lib Dems are traditionally more aligned to Labour, a left-wing alliance wouldn't have crossed the 325-seat threshold required for a majority. Only a Conservative-Liberal agreement could make up the numbers. Clegg therefore had the moral imperative to form a government with Cameron for the sake of economic stability. It was always going to be a risk, unpopular with the voter base, but Clegg took a decision which was right for the country.

Perhaps more contentious than forming the coalition, though, were the subsequent policies it legislated. Most infamously, this included the decision to treble tuition fees.

The outcry directed at Clegg for this is somewhat exaggerated. A party's election manifesto is formed on the basis that they win the election; Clegg did not. As such, the Lib Dems didn't have the mandate to implement their entire manifesto, especially as minor partners within a coalition. Compromise was inevitable. Although it's regrettable that this came in the form of U-turning on tuition fees, it's important to consider their consequences within context.

The projections that university applications from poorer backgrounds would fall did not come to pass. This was in part due to the removal of up-front fees previously introduced by Labour. Furthermore, the income threshold for the repayment of fees was raised and the percentage of income taken from graduates was lowered. By paying over a longer period, the immediate burden to graduates was lesser. These reforms meant that university became accessible to more people, contrary to predictions. Though a political misstep, the impact on students was nowhere near as heavy as projected. Arguably, it's Clegg's legacy which suffered more than we did.

The lesson to be taken from the coalition, then, is one which Sir Ed Davey repeated numerous times during the most recent election campaign: don't make promises you can't keep. The nature of our parliamentary democracy is compromise; the nature of politics, however, is storytelling.



Stories are more compelling when they're written against the backdrop of dichotomies: of good and evil; of honesty and opportunism; of loyalty and hypocrisy. Clegg fell on the wrong side of all of these – but it just takes one look at the budgets passed by George Osborne after the coalition to see just how successful Clegg was in curtailing the impacts of austerity.

The £12 billion in welfare cuts introduced by Osborne in July 2015 had been vetoed by Clegg during the coalition - as was Cameron's desire in 2010 to halve the deficit as a proportion of GDP within four years rather than five. These positions, contrary to Conservatives' desires, meant that the economy was able to grow whilst spending reductions occurred at a slower rate. This nuance, however, gets lost in the narrative which sees Lib Dems as enablers of austerity.

The coalition wasn't perfect, and the decisions taken by Clegg should rightfully be scrutinised. It's important to remember, however, that Clegg was never Prime Minister. Indeed, he often challenged the man that was. Our duty as Liberal Democrats is to emphasise our positive role in the coalition, dispel the rumours that it was politically convenient, and fight for the chance to be returned to government. Combatting these narratives isn't easy and nor is it politically attractive – but when has that ever stopped us before?

**Jan Maciejewski,**  
*St John's College.*

# MUSIC AND POLITICS, A LIBERAL PERSPECTIVE ON POPULISM

## The Vice President, The Queen's College

On Wednesday the 22nd of May 2024, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak stands outside of Ten Downing Street, news of a general election to be imminently announced. Two minutes into the speech, as the surely outgoing Prime Minister slowly gets soggier from the rain, the iconic ‘things can only get better’ song rings out. The worlds of music and politics collide once again, and the dangers of its misuse rear their ugly head.

‘Things can only get better’ hit number one in the UK charts in 1994, and solidified its historic status three years later when it was the backdrop to Tony Blair’s New Labour campaign. The motivation to use a pop song as political fuel may have stemmed from Bill Clinton’s use of Fleetwood Mac’s ‘Don’t stop’ at rallies through 1992/3. Bill Clinton’s use of the song signified a breath of fresh air which was upbeat and optimistic and may have given him the ‘rock and roll’ identity which helped him become the first of his generation to serve as President.

Dr Stuart McAnulla from Leeds University states that ‘what happens in American politics often comes over to the UK in some form’, and the upbeat nature of both songs relate to an overarching theme of change in both political campaigns. ‘Things can only get better’ was performed at Labour rallies and events throughout the campaign, despite the initial hesitation of the lead singer, Cunnah. The song, and the campaign more broadly, was a massive success: winning Labour their greatest landslide ever.

So, what has this got to do with a general election twenty-seven years later?

At a first glance, it may seem like the story is repeating itself, fourteen years of Conservative austerity and mismanagement, from Thatcher’s milk snatching to Johnson’s Covid party problems and the lettuce that lasted longer than Liz Truss.

This is seemingly further backed up by the general election results, Labour once again won a historic victory. Delving deeper however, we see cracks start to form in this argument. Steve Bray, the man who was responsible for the ‘trolling’ of Rishi Sunak, was in fact an Anti-Tory activist. He states that he ‘didn’t do it for Labour,’ and that he instead did it because it was the ‘top trolling song for the Conservatives.’ Looking across the country, this sentiment is echoed, many of the disenfranchised looked to the Green Party and the Liberal Democrats, not Labour. Scarily however, 14% of the vote was won by right-wing populism, represented by Nigel Farage’s Reform UK party. Though the Party only won 5 seats in Parliament, they came second in 98 seats, splitting not only the Conservative, but also the Labour vote in highly Muslim areas. The difference between the 1997 and 2024 general elections is that in 1997 the public voted for ‘change’ under Blair, and in 2024, whilst the use of ‘things can only get better’ may have helped give an image of change to Starmer’s campaign, the decisive factor was anti-Conservative sentiment.

UK Populist movements have often used typically patriotic British music, such as Arne’s Rule Britannia to give the impression that their party is fighting for your “British rights”, even though being a “Brit” is an ever-evolving term.

Perhaps the most frustrating part of the Reform party is that it does not actually represent the portion of the population that it purports to. Unlike other political parties, Reform UK is a company with the primary goal of making profit for its shareholders.

The shiny new light blue branding does not change the fact that for years now, populists such as Farage and Tice have been scapegoating immigration as the “root cause” for all the country’s problems, ingraining their hatred into any who will listen. Skilled immigration is imperative for the economy: the NHS would crumble without the help of this labour. An NHS Confederation article in December 2023 outlined that ‘immigration and international 1 D:Ream, 1993 recruitment allows a wide pool of candidates.’

It outlines that more than 17% of NHS staff are from overseas, and that this percentage is higher for nurses at about 27%. Reform UK’s consistent use of scapegoats and a bastardisation of patriotism is a longstanding issue. For the past 10 years now, Farage has sung ‘patriotically’ in various contexts, usually rinsing ‘Rule Britannia’ and God Save the King. One example of many is in 2020 in Parliament Square after the UK left the EU. Scenes of British and English flags being waved to the backing of the National Anthem, whilst Nigel Farage stands at the head, portraying himself as a British saviour. This saviour complex leads to an almost cult like following, allowing figures like Farage to make these disastrous claims about immigration, stirring up hatred within communities.

The collision of music and politics is inevitable, and is represented in the good, the bad, and the ugly. ‘The good’ shown through the ‘New’ Labour and the Clinton campaigns of the past achieving popularity through upbeat music and promises of change. ‘The bad’ represented by activists highlighting the shortcomings of the Labour of the present, ignoring the need for change. ‘The ugly’ in the form of the Reform Party using ‘patriotic’ British music as a platform to fuel racist and bigoted ideology, as well as the spread of misinformation. We must always be mindful about how politicians utilise the important tool of music in campaigning, and always hold these choices to account

**Sebastian Evans,**  
Vice President - *The Queen's College*.





Zaghām Farhan and Heather Judge  
Long Vac 2024

Published 14.08.2024

