



newsletter of liberal international british group

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TSUNAMI

Tsunami is a word that has crept into the mainstream English language probably over the last thirty years or so, but its full force was not understood until the events of Boxing Day. Tidal wave doesn't quite conjure up the scale. Many readers will have seen our treasurer Dai Liyanage on tele responding to the crisis, and if we are fortunate enough to have no more direct connection with the tragedy our friendship and solidarity with Dai brings us closer to the event.

What can one say? Individuals are responding generously, as are governments and aid agencies. It is one of the virtues of globalisation that we are able to do so. *InterLiB* can only urge you to keep up your generosity and the use your position as politicians to keep up the pressure on governments to act and monitor those actions. This will become more urgent as the media forgets the crisis and moves on to the next (dare I say it - episode of Big Brother).

There are at least two areas of conflict within the crisis area - Aceh and the north of Sri Lanka. One of those conflicts has been going on at least as long as the Troubles in Northern Ireland. I'm not sure that the British are particularly informed on these issues, but justice and reconciliation, however that might be, should ideally come out of this disaster. What of Burma? A country whose government we rightly criticise, and as I write we have little knowledge of the impact of the flood but suspect a considerable under-estimation from sources available so far.

What parallels can we look to? The Lisbon earthquake of 1755 was a catastrophe on a similar scale. Lisbon was the fourth largest city in the western world at the time. Some would argue that the autocracy that set in the wake of the disaster set the tone for Portuguese politics right down to the late Twentieth century.

In the short term it is rightly a matter of immediate relief for as many of the victims as is possible, before our worst projections set in. Dig deep.

UKRAINE – which Victor?

For many who, like myself, have visited Ukraine since its non-“democratic” days, the events of the last few weeks represent the most important watershed since 1989 and the breaching of the Berlin Wall. The previous seminal event in the crumbling of totalitarian rule in Central and Eastern Europe was the rise of Solidarity (Solidarnosc) in Poland.

I was in Russia in the immediate aftermath of the elections. Russian TV reported the premature reaction of President Vladimir Putin – not the World’s most obvious democrat – and of the Communist leader, Zyuganov, both rejoicing in the fixed “victory” of the Ukrainian Prime Minister Victor Yanukovich who had benefited from two campaigning visits by Putin, as well as inducements to Ukrainians such as an offer of dual citizenship. Clearly, Putin is trying to fix a Belarus/Ukraine/Russian Slavic hub as a counterweight to the EU.

The importance to Russian citizens of a fraud-free re-run of the Ukrainian elections is immense. After Georgia’s “Rose Revolution”, which saw the ouster of Shevernadze and his replacement by the Western-orientated Michael Shavashvili, later confirmed by a national vote, and the moves by Moldovans to throw off the Russian yoke by reaching agreement with the “Trans-Dnistrrians”, Ukraine, with its 50 million inhabitants could provide an example for Russia itself. The Southern “stans” may remain Stalinist, and Belarus bizarre, but a democratic Ukraine, courting its destiny as a member of the EU and NATO, would force a total re-think of the Kremlin’s strategy.

The people on the freezing streets of Kiyiv, Lviv and other Ukrainian cities are not just supporting the other Victor – Yushchenko – but are insisting on their basic human right of democratic choice. The latest news of a potential deal involving a truly independent Electoral Commission are encouraging, but foreign observers are desperately needed for the 26th December re-run of the poll. Most potential observers will have made arrangements to spend Christmas with their families!

Putin has intervened in these elections with inducements to the Ukrainian people. It is wholly appropriate for the EU Council of Ministers to tell the Ukrainian people that, if they have truly democratic elections for President and the Supreme Rada and continue their path towards a corruption-free market economy, then we will establish a timetable for Ukraine’s membership of our exciting multi-national project.

Ukraine may play a full part in tomorrow’s Europe, not in confrontation with Russia, but as part of a wider co-operation with a Russia which may learn to trust its own people – a democratic, not a czarist future.

Robert Woodthorpe Browne

**An awkward subject
that many would like to
sweep under the carpet**
*the story Tim Pascall wouldn’t
give up on*

Some of you may remember me, perhaps even as the ‘Aids crank from Amsterdam’. I’m sure that’s how some

of our parliamentarians still see me – that guy that keeps pestering them on a subject they would prefer to forget. Fourteen UK publishers said much the same. There are two problems, wrote one of them, with the subject of Aids in Africa, two of the three words. People are sick to death of hearing about Aids, and even more so of Africa's interminable problems.

But while in Malawi, launching the book I've now written "Aids in Africa - how did it ever happen?", I met some of the people who have been hit by the tragedy, like a young lady of 28, married in 2001, lost her first child in 2002, and then her husband in 2003, and now she knows why. She too is HIV-positive, and with a CD-4 count, measuring the strength of her immune system, of 250. "That's fine" I was able to assure her, "you're in time. The drugs will save you. You can look forward to a long and healthy life". "Yes, but I'm weak already, and when will they actually arrive?" she asked. The drugs should have arrived the previous month, but things are again going desperately wrong.

And will she ever be able to face another marriage and fulfil her natural desire to have children? Medically there's no reason why not, provided she does what the doctors tell her. But how do you ask a man to marry you if you're HIV-positive?

Another one I met (but which can't be written of outside the party) was a father who had lost his wife to Aids in June, and was now himself on treatment, available to him because he's in the army and they've got access to the drugs. My only thought was that he has to live - for the sake of those three children he obviously adores. They were relatives of the young Malawian teacher who was helping me

on the launch, so the whole family joined me for dinner at the hotel I was staying at in Zomba, the former capital and now the home of the country's main university. It was a wonderful evening, power-cuts and all, and made all the frustrations of the launch seem worth it.

Perhaps I can't make the 'great and the good' listen to me, read the book or open it even, or at least not for the present. But while I need them, they're not the ones for whom I wrote it. I wrote it for the millions and millions (the latest count is somewhere between 24 and 28 million) who are facing the terrible traumas and consequences of HIV-infection and Aids. It is for the parents, who - however foolish they may once have been - are now facing the death of the partner they love, and then possibly their own death as well. And what will then happen to their children?

It is for the millions of children having to grow up without parents, being cared for instead by relatives who often don't actually love them very much. But someone has to look after them - 440,000 of them in Malawi alone at the end of 2002. It'll be more now, because while the parents die, most children survive, so it must now be over half a million in a total population of about 12 million, not much more than Scotland.

That's why I wrote the book, and why I keep pestering our politicians. We cannot go on ignoring what is becoming the biggest humanitarian catastrophe the world has ever known. At least 16 million have already died of Aids in Africa. 40 million will, and the figure could easily reach 80 million if we carry on as now.

The book is not just an analysis of what has gone - and continues to go - so terribly wrong in Africa. It also offers some realistic solutions, addressing both the issue of prevention - particularly amongst the young - and of treatment for those who could be saved. But because the world has effectively ignored the issue for so long, dealing with it now is going to cost an awful lot of money – between 3 and 7 billion dollars a year (depending on how hard we try to find the infected before they become too ill to be treated) for five years at least, and probably more like 10. That's up to 70 billion dollars spread over 10 years, less than was used in a month to try to bomb Iraq into submission. It's just £1.65 (€2.50) a month for every European who can afford it. But not spending it will mean death, death and more death, mostly of young parents, and millions and millions of orphans in a continent that's already struggling to cope.

I won't be in Bournemouth to 'promote' the book, as my publisher is a very small one from one of the poorest countries on earth, and I have already spent over 3000 pounds trying to get the book to the young of Malawi, and onto our own markets here. And I just couldn't face another session of people walking past, 'too embarrassed to talk about Aids'. In any case, I don't believe that that many people will buy it until it gets some international recognition, something that I am sure will eventually happen.

Meanwhile, if anyone wants to know what Aids in Africa is really about, and what could realistically be done to relieve it, then please do read this book. It's available at £11.95 from any good bookshop (one that is willing to order books from publishers or their agents), or it can be ordered directly

from
orders@africanbookscollective.com or
www.africanbookscollective.com
They're based at the 'Jam Factory' in
Oxford!

If you live in Malawi then, thanks to lower costs, a print-run of 2000 and a subsidy of about 70 pence a copy, it is available at the much more 'affordable' price of £1.80!

And maybe I'll see you in Harrogate next year, if not earlier somewhere else.

Tim Pascall/Frank Ham
frankham@freeler.nl

New Executive Team at Liberal International British Group

At its AGM on July 7th at the House of Lords, a new Executive Committee was elected to run the Liberal International British Group. Sharon Bowles has been subsequently elected Chair, with Gary Lawson as Vice Chair and Organising Secretary.

LIBG is part of the world federation of liberal political parties - Liberal International. Founded in 1947, Liberal International has become the pre-eminent network for liberal parties and for the strengthening of liberal democracy around the world. There are a number of common principles which unite all liberal parties from Africa, the Americas, Asia and Europe; human rights, free and fair elections and multi-party democracy, social justice, tolerance, social market economy, free trade, environmental sustainability and a strong sense of international solidarity. Naturally in the application of these principles in different national circumstances there is diversity among liberal parties.

The British Group of Liberal International publicises the work of Liberal International, arranges overseas visits, provides hospitality for visiting liberals and keeps Liberal Democrats informed of liberal activities world-wide. It also arranges meetings and seminars and produces regular newsletters. The British Group is represented at Congresses and Executive meetings of the Liberal International. More information about LIBG is available at www.libg.org.uk.

Sharon Bowles said "Now is an important time for Liberals. History shows Liberals have led the way at times of crisis - and sometimes been put aside in calmer times. Democracies now face challenges to their security in the face of increasing terrorism, but it is vital that the response be liberal, inclusive and outward looking.

Security is the theme for the Liberal International Congress next May and the Group will begin examination of the subject at our Forum on 11 October."

Sharon Bowles is a member of the Liberal Democrats' Federal Executive and International Relations Committees, and was a South East Region Liberal Democrat Candidate at the recent elections to the European Parliament. Gary Lawson is Development Director for the Centre for Reform and Liberal Democrat PPC for Portsmouth North.

The full LIBG Executive Committee is now:

President: Tim Garden
Vice-Presidents: John Alderdice, Peter Billenness, Sharon Bowles, David Griffiths, Charles Kennedy,

John Melling, Richard Moore, Graham Watson.

Chair: Sharon Bowles

Vice Chair: Gary Lawson

Hon. Secretary: Gary Lawson & Ahmed Mallick

Treasurer: Dai Laiyanage & David Rebak

Executive: Hugh Dykes, Nilmini di Silva, Derek Partridge, Frances Peacock, Bruce Ritchie, James Sandbach, Monika Skowronska, Anneliese Waugh, Robert Woodthorpe Browne

And the Scottish Executive

Chair - Ron Waddell

Vice Chair - Paul Eadie

Secretary - John Barnett

Treasurer - John Melling

President - Elspeth Attwooll

THREE BUSY YEARS

I had the twin advantages when starting my Chairmanship of the Group of having understudied for three years Richard Moore, whose experience of Liberal International is without equal, and of having the organising skills of David Griffiths's office. The first year's programme had been fixed in advance, with my active participation.

To have had John Alderdice as President during the whole period meant that we maintained the credibility inherited from his immediate predecessors Graham Watson and Russell Johnston. And I was helped by a series of well-balanced committees who got on well with each other.

Each year when I gave my Report to the AGM at the House of Lords, I was left almost breathless by the amount we had actually done, and all of it in

addition to busy personal schedules of all concerned.

Our Fringe Meetings at Autumn Liberal Democrat Conferences had attracted top speakers providing both topical and educational themes for participants.

The “rolling programme” on China brought in academics, representatives of China and then Taiwan and Hong Kong. This continues to be run by the extremely hard-working Monika Skowronska, who was joint Secretary during my 3 years, and who had the major task of taking over David Griffiths’ office’s functions when he chose to step down.

Other Forum meetings, held in London, provided a real diversity of themes concerning all Continents – including an overview of Latin America by the Director General of the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House), Prof. Bulmer-Thomas, followed later by a talk by Carlos Gasoliba MP on Latin America.

The Diplomats’ Reception, held each February, grows in stature, and the Liberal Democrat Parliamentarians are now more in evidence. Both they and LIBG members have an excellent opportunity to network with a wide variety of diplomats, including last year the Commonwealth Secretary General.

A feature of last year’s LibDem Conference, to be repeated in 2004, was the invitation to foreign journalists and a Correspondent from the BBC World Service to give an overview of world events as seen from their countries.

Abroad, we have had strong inputs into LI Executive meetings and

Congresses. In Senegal, our delegation, jointly with the LibDems, provided the bulk of amendments to make both the Theme Resolution on “Islam and the West” and the “World Today” workable. These amendments were thrashed out at a meeting in my London flat and finalised by the brilliance of the Vice Chairman – and now my successor – Sharon Bowles.

At the two Congresses, in Budapest and Dakar, I chaired the theme resolutions – the organisers like to have at least one native English speaker, but I found my knowledge of French invaluable when dealing with French-speakers, such as the Moroccan and Senegalese delegations. I have been asked to carry out the same role in Sofia next May. Well, I suppose it may stop noisy interventions by me from the floor!

We had two “Annual Dinners” during my tenure. Very well attended and with remarkable speakers – the more recent starring NATO Deputy General Secretary (and former Young Liberal) Jamie Shea and our incoming President Sir (now Lord) Tim Garden.

Sharon hosted two garden parties at her Berkhamsted home, and Anneliese Waugh once again invited us this year. These are very enjoyable occasions, always with a notable speaker, and well attended.

I have spoken of matters English. However, North of the Border there has been a renaissance of LIBG Scottish Section under John Melling and now Ron Waddell. I attended one Christmas Party in Edinburgh in my first year as Chair, where the attendance was disappointing. I missed the party at the home of Jamie Earl of Mar and Kellie where the attendance was about 100, but could not resist a

visit to the home of former LI President David Steel at Aikwood Tower.

I undertook a mission to Spain in 2003, shortly before their local elections, hoping to encourage liberal candidates in Valencia, Alicante and Andalusia. This was with the (non-financial!) support of LI, ELDR and the Liberal Democrats.

I wish to thank all members for their kindness and support. I remain on the Committee, committed to offer support in the promotion of internationalism within the UK and of Liberalism in those countries, such as Spain and France, where it has largely lost its voice.

Robert Woodthorpe Browne

SCOTTISH SECTION OF LIBG GARDEN PARTY

Former LI President and current President of the Scottish Section of LIBG Lord Steel of Aikwood hosted a Garden Party at Aikwood Tower, near Selkirk, the outstanding historical building so lovingly, along with its gardens, restored/rebuilt by David and Judy. Judy arranged conducted tours of the outside, and David explained the interior.

The event was a tribute to the work in Northern Ireland of Lord John Alderdice, who attended with his wife Joan.

Ron Waddell, Chairman of the section, introduced the guest to the 50 members and guests. At 60 members – more were signed up during the afternoon on which the sun shone, after a miserable

morning – the Scottish Section is an extremely important part of LIBG.

Among those attending were the Earl of Mar and Kellie, who had hosted last year's event, Archie Kirkwood MP, Jeremy Purvis MSP and LI Vice President and recent LIBG Chairman, Robert Woodthorpe Browne, making his second visit to the Scottish section.



John Alderdice spoke of the importance of the work of LI world-wide and its expansion in Africa, Asia and, hopefully, Latin America. He emphasised the respect British Liberal Democrats enjoy from other Liberals which allows us to influence international thinking and actions.

Robert Woodthorpe Browne praised David Steel's work as LI President at a time when it was difficult to distinguish the true liberals among the Eastern European parties which used the liberal name, and looked forward to John Alderdice's taking over the role at the Sofia Congress in 200

Robert Woodthorpe Browne

EVENTS

18th January 6:30pm CAABU - ***Iraq - A humanitarian catastrophe*** - speakers: Oliver Burch, Christian Aid, Roland Huguenin-Benjamin, Red Cross, Haifa Zangana, Iraqi novelist *Macmillan Room, Portcullis House, House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA (St. Stephen's Entrance)* Underground: Westminster.

For more details contact: Hana Al-Hirsi on 020 7832 1310 or alhirsih@caabu.org

23rd January 3.00pm SOAS Palestine Society and Friends of Birzeit University ***The Wall's Implications for Palestinian Life*** - speakers - Dr. Azmi Bishara, Member of Israeli Knesset, Victor Kattan, Arab Media Watch, Prof. Iain Scobbie & Dr. Mushtaq Khan, SOAS.

Brunei Gallery Lecture Theatre, School of Oriental and African Studies, Thornhaugh Street, Russell Square, London WC1H 0XG

Please reserve: palsoc@soas.ac.uk or 020 7832 1341

25th January 7.00pm LIBG Winter Forum - ***Peace & Security*** - speakers include Shami Chakrabarti, Liberty. *Committee Room 2, House of Lords London SW1A 0AA (St. Stephen's Entrance)* Underground: Westminster.

7th February 6.15pm Centre for Reform - ***Global governance, legitimacy and renewal*** - speakers Chris Huhne MEP and Jef McAllister (Time Magazine), Chair: Dr Robert Falkner (LSE)

Lady Violet Room, NLC

For more details contact: Tom Beedham 020 7631 3566 tbeedham@cfr.org.uk

8th February 6.30pm LIBG Annual ***Diplomats Reception.*** *David Lloyd George Room, NLC*

25th-27th February Scottish Lib Dem Conference, Perth

26th February 6.50pm LIBG Scottish Group *Development, Debt & Disaster* speaker Tom Brake MP, *Salutation Hotel, Perth*

4th-6th March Lib Dem Spring Conference, Harrogate

5th April 7.00pm LIBG Spring Forum ***Caucasus***

Lady Violet Room, NLC

1st May 4.30am ***International Dawn Chorus Day Walk***

Tower Hamlets Cemetery Park, Southern Grove, London E3

For other events worldwide check www.idcd.info

12th-14th May 53rd LI Congress - ***Freedom & Security***

Sofia, Bulgaria

3rd July 2.00pm LIBG Annual ***Garden Party***

Sevenoaks, Kent

7th July 6.30pm LIBG Annual ***General Meeting***

House of Lords

21st September 8.00pm LIBG/FPA Fringe ***Views from the Foreign Press Conference*** *Hotel, Blackpool*

NLC= National Liberal Club, Whitehall Place, London SW1A 2HE

Underground: Embankment

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