



Sixth Form Mercury

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'We can be heroes': The Lib Dem conference

Sat in the front row of a packed auditorium at the Brighton Centre, I eagerly anticipated what the Liberal Democrats had in store for the launch of their 2012 Federal Conference.

A full 15 minutes behind schedule, the lights finally dimmed and David Bowie's classic 'Heroes' began to belt out of the speakers, to introduce the charismatic president of the party, Tim Farron. "We can be heroes, just for one day," quoted Farron, referring to the day Nick Clegg agreed to enter government in coalition with the Conservative Party. His reasoning was simple - the only other alternative at the time was a minority Conservative government, something that would have led to the Tories solely making the key economic decisions.

On top of this, Farron claims that David Cameron probably would have held a follow up election later on in the year, which would have led to a straightforward Conservative majority, as six months or so of donations to the Liberal Democrats would be no match for the funding the Tories receive from city businessmen, or the heavily trade union-backed Labour Party.

Conveniently forgetting any drawbacks or the disasters the party have encountered while being in coalition, Farron encouraged party members to continue engaging with the party and showing support: "why be a hero just for one day?"

It was at this point he introduced a man who, amongst other things, was in the top 20 of the iTunes singles chart at the time. Indeed, the parody song, 'Nick Clegg says I'm sorry' was a fitting microcosm of what was expected to be the main point of discussion at the conference - Nick Clegg's apology over tuition fees just a week earlier.

In his opening speech, however, he was anything but apologetic. A confident and self-assured Deputy Prime Minister refused to apologise for cutting taxes for the poorest - halving the income tax those on minimum wage have to pay, something that a majority Labour government couldn't man-



In case you haven't already guessed, he's sorry

age at times of economic prosperity let alone recession; he refused to apologise for the record number of apprenticeships being given out in this country; he refused to apologise for closing no post office while being in government; and he refused to apologise for providing an extra £900 for every child from a disadvantaged background for their school. Indeed, he states that an independent group of researchers concluded that the Lib Dems have implemented 75% of their manifesto - far more than the Conservatives, and certainly not bad for a party that only has 8% of the MPs in the House of Commons.

From here the conference was plunged into five days of discussion, argument, heated debate, and, for those immature enough, MP and Celebrity bingo.

With every Liberal Democrat MP, as well as the likes of Hugh Grant, Steve Coogan and Nick Robinson, in attendance, this was a chance for anyone fortunate enough to be attending, to address their personal concerns and issues directly to those at the very top, as well as to have a conversation with and obtain forthright opinions on niche issues from Hollywood stars.

The conference was spread across the entire Brighton Centre as well the Grand and Hilton hotels on the Brighton sea front, with as many as a dozen different fringe and or discussions events happening at the same time - each being attended by numerous A-

list politicians, as well as senior figures from the media. Topics ranged from whether Britain is resigned to having governments of more than one party from now on, to how it would be possible to keep the media in control.

A huge media presence was also a key feature of the conference - although common knowledge dictates that journalists aren't as straightforward as they appear.

I fell victim to this on the first day. As chairman of Liberal Youth in Croydon and Sutton, I was invited to take part in an interview on a politics radio programme on Radio 5 Live, hosted by political analyst Jon Piennar.

Before the show had started he told me that he would ask me a question regarding how I thought the Lib Dems were doing in government, regarding young people. Quickly preparing an answer in my head, I awaited the exact wording of his question.

After giving a quick introduction of me, he delivered the question quick as a flash; "Do you forgive Nick Clegg?" A combination of not knowing quite how to answer the question and getting back at him for putting me on the spot in a such a way, I did what any true politician would do and neatly swerved the emphasis of the question, replying that I felt Nick Clegg was doing as well as one could reasonable expect as the leader of the minority party in government, and his one big mistake regarding young people was the fact that he broke a promise he had made to them.

Overall, the Lib Dem conference was a highly interesting experience. While the party is currently going over a bit of a bump, the conference showed that there is still a strong support base out there.

By Syed Imam



Dear All,

Christmas is just around the corner (as well as replies from Ox-bridge...), and to enhance the festive spirit, this edition of the Mercury brings joyous tidings of the Lib Dem conference, theatre reviews, musings on the role of football in history, and analysis of the war in Iraq.

It's as though Santa himself has written this issue, just to make you all happy.

Enjoy!

By Nikhil Vyas and Kane Walpole

Article	Page
The Lib Dem Conference	1
Message from the editors	2
'The Spiders of Allah' review	2
Chek-off the stage	3
Art corner	4
Logic of Lorenzo	4

Book review: 'The Spiders of Allah'

By Louis Woodhead

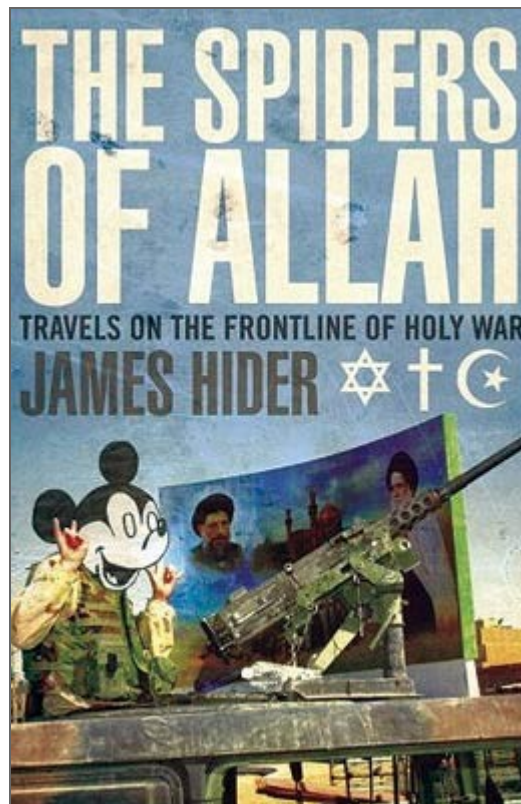
Book reviews at the Mercury work slightly differently to at the Telegraph or Guardian. We don't get hot off the press hardbacks driven to our desk via courier. We get tatty two-year-old paperbacks from our local library. So apologies if you have already crossed paths with 'The Spiders of Allah'.

Funny title isn't it? But it isn't as crude as it sounds.

Hider, a Middle East correspondent at the Times, based the title on an urban myth that circulated during the early years of the Iraq war. During the siege of Fallujah, it was rumoured that Iraqi jihadis had been sent the ultimate secret weapon by Allah: giant spiders, 'the size of saucepans' apparently.

But the book covers far more than Iraqi war trivia. We join Hider in Israel, for instance. Within the first chapter, the complexity of the Middle East's predicament is revealed through a series of interviews with Zionist settlers, who won't budge as they see themselves as fulfilling an ancient prophecy, and Palestinians, who quite rightly feel unfairly treated.

A few pages later and we are in Gaza. Hider has walked down a street, passing radicalised pre-teens playing foot-



Once past the title, it's an insightful study of a traumatic conflict

ball, and is interviewing a dangerous demagogue, conscious that any one of the drones flying overhead could be aimed for his house.

The tone has been set but, as the Iraq war breaks, Hider soon moves to Baghdad. He covers tragic stories with due cultural sensitivity, taking care to learn about Iraqi and Islamic culture and traditions.

He seems to do well in his arduous and depressing job as a war correspondent but occasionally his professionalism slips.

Whilst passing through security check points to enter the religious city of Karbala, to report on the Day of Ashura (a day of mourning for all Shi'a Muslims), Hider realised that there was a bottle of wine in his girlfriend's bag.

Surrounded by thousands of Muslims preparing for a ceremony of self flagellation, already understandably uncomfortable about the westerner in their presence, the situation was treacherous. It took bribery, a ploy he had previously railed against, to avoid a beating or worse.

As well as being informative, Hider possesses a good writing style (with only the odd exception: I've never heard a phrase scream 'patronizing primary school teacher' louder than 'taking the biscuit') and describes scenes of horror vividly.

He seems to understand the cultural nuances more than many other reporters and conveys them well, making this a far more interesting and informative read than yet another dryly written newspaper article.

Chek-off the stage!

By Henry Stanley and Karim Abu-Seer

A recent theatrical expedition to watch *The Three Sisters* at the Young Vic revealed to us the (supposed) enigmatic virtuosity of the Russian theatre practitioner Anton Chekhov.

A master of the dramatic style of realism, his naturalistic dialogues and thematic studies of Russian society are highly acclaimed in their breakaway from the traditional techniques.

But if this sounds like it's unbearably pretentious and boring, don't worry! You're not alone. Henry Stanley here slates Chekhov in the harshest terms, while Karim Abu-Seer valiantly defends the playwright's reputation.

HENRY STANLEY writes: As the actors strode back on to stage and took their bows, I glanced down the row and was greeted by a similar look of bemusement from those around me. What had we just watched? Was there *any* meaning behind the last three hours of seemingly meaningless drivel? And why, in the name of Shakespeare, is there a giant pile of astroturf at the back of the stage?

Chekhov's 'Three Sisters' began very slowly but, at first, I had hope. This was realism after all. We recently saw *The Changeling* in the same theatre and that had been odd to say the very least, with jelly representing every bodily juice imaginable.

Settling back in my seat, I decided to wait out the initial ploddings, believing that it had to heat up soon. Then the slight grip I had on reality collapsed as Nirvana was blasted through the speakers at a deafening level and the cast proceeded to destroy what had been an almost civilized party. This was, supposedly, 'drunken' behaviour. Seriously? Since when does an entire family (including a 60-something uncle) flip from normal (if slightly dreary) conversation to suddenly throwing their dinner to the floor whilst one couple strip off and start whipping each other with their discarded clothes?

Unfortunately things did not get any better, with the cast spending the majority of the scenes hiding under tables, draped with sheets, discussing whether a return to their home town Moscow is on the horizon. Then most of the village burns down - cue a very smoky set (despite everyone being indoors).



Anton Chekhov

This seemed to be the climax - the mystery of the fire being steadily resolved. I braced myself for the actors to take their bows. But they carried on talking. And talking. A very drunk granddad delivers a monologue on existence. The cast retreat back under their bedclothes for more Moscow-orientated discussion. Oh, and an army of men begin to remove the blocks that make up the stage. Err... *why?*

'So what?' I hear you ask. 'Its realism - get used to it. This is one of Chekhov's masterpieces of theatre.' But there is a distinct lack of plot or action. It's just a load of random strings of 'reality' pulled out of shape and thrown on stage for our 'enjoyment.'

Annoyingly as well, all the action occurs off-stage. The secret affair: off stage. The mysterious fire: during the interval - and off stage. The final duel: off stage. At least we have the rousing last speech to finish the play. Surely that will make up in some part for an otherwise boring play? Wrong.

Not only did it go on and on and on, with the three sisters standing astride the giant mound of astro grit (still no idea why that was there), but the actress delivering it seems to drain the very essence of life from my body. I find myself urging her on, begging for an end to the madness. But she just keeps talking. To be totally honest, I think I was asleep when she finally made it to the end.

KARIM ABU-SEER writes: One of my favourite aspects of *Three Sisters* was the philosophical concepts that were raised and interwoven throughout the plot.

Whilst this sometimes was done with a lack of subtlety that was detrimental to the play's fluidity, it nevertheless highlighted poignant topics.

One of these was whether or not we could ever experience true happiness within our lives, or whether we should focus purely on our work. Another was the idea of settling down with someone not because you were in love with each other, but merely due to convenience - the benefits of the security the relationship would provide outweighing the fact that you had no feelings for the person.

Whilst the play is labelled a comedy, these questions weighed on the mind of the audience, and the group of Wilson's boy left the theatre subdued.

The issues raised forced us to formulate our own views on matters we probably had not thought about too much prior to viewing the play, which I think added greatly to our experience of the play.

And the acting was superb, with the three Sisters playing their parts very well; in particular, Olga played the part of an exhausted, emotionally drained woman very well, as she struggled to get on with everyday life and console her younger sisters.

The stage was very small, but this did little to detract from the play. It was made of many multiple tables, which were all moved at different points in the play. As the play progressed the different tables were carried off by the stage crew, revealing relevant props. Whether this was a contemporary touch or an original addition to the play, it made it clear to the audience that every step made was slick and well-drilled.

Overall, it was an excellent play - all that it lacked was fluidity in the ways the characters presented their philosophical views.

Hopefully these differing perspectives have opened the door to evenings of reasoned debate amongst your peers, followed by a trip to the theatre to find out for yourself!

And don't forget that you have the chance to see fantastic live theatre, right here in the school, with this term's production of *The Madness of George III* running from December 14-16.

Get your tickets today!



Art corner

By Alex Clarke

This issue of Mercury sees one of the most ground-breaking developments in recent world history.

A second artist has joined our ranks (with Manu nobly stepping aside), and what's more, he has produced his own highly interpretive self portrait.

Yes ladies and gentlemen, we can proudly welcome Alex Clarke to the crew.



The logic of Lorenzo

By Lorenzo Wong

Our sports correspondent sheds light on a forgotten corner of football history...

With sport being surrounded by countless controversies nowadays, it seems irrational to simply bang on about the cheating, racism and corruption, when the eyes of the media are already gazing with intent. So instead, I've decided to recall a past event which everyone, even those who have a distaste for sport, can take something from.

The story starts in the spring of 1942. In a bakery in Kiev, then part of the Nazi-occupied Soviet Union, Mykola Trusevych and devout FC Dynamo Kyiv supporter Otto Schmidt are piecing together an extraordinary plan to form a football team in an act of resistance against the German forces.

Having been released from the Darnitsa camp for Soviet prisoners of war, Trusevych, previously Dynamo's goalkeeper, starts searching for fellow footballers who might also have avoided execution. After weeks of roaming the city, he manages to find eight of his old teammates and three Lokomotiv Kiev players. Consisting of twelve malnourished young men and a box of red football shirts found in an abandoned warehouse, FC Start was born.

FC Start soon took to the pitch to play in a makeshift league organised by the Nazis, and, to put it lightly, began crushing every single

team put in front of them: 6-2 against the Hungarian garrison, 11-0 against the Romanian garrison, 9-1 against the railroad workers team, and so on.

FC Start were a formidable outfit. In fact, so formidable, that the German Luftwaffe team eventually decided to put an end to the growing sense of pride amongst the Ukrainians by giving Start a good old fashioned beating. On 6 August 1942, Start smacked them 5-1. Still smarting from their defeat, the Luftwaffe team organised a rematch three days later, making sure that the weak and hungry Start players had barely enough time to recover.

To make matters worse, a Nazi SS officer was appointed as referee to ensure that the Luftwaffe XI got more favourable decisions than United at Old Trafford.

With the 9 August approaching, everything was set for an easy German victory. In a terrific act of defiance, every single FC Start player refused to give the Hitler salute before the game, when they had previously been ordered to do so.

Over time, recollections of the match have become distorted and inconsistent. What can be said for sure is that the Luftwaffe players

used violence throughout the match in an attempt to intimidate their opposition. But what's more important is that FC Start managed to win 5-3.

It is this clash which soon became known as the Death Match, because for most of the Cold War, it was believed that the FC Start players were rounded up after the game and mercilessly shot dead by Nazi officials.

Only recently has it been discovered that this account is false - merely fuel to feed the engine of Soviet propaganda at the time.

In fact, the players of FC Start were forced to keep quiet about their experience for the next 50 years or so, with some being tortured for their part in the humiliation of the Nazis.

So, what can we all take from this?

Perhaps this is clichéd, but the experience of the FC Start players shows us that no challenge is insurmountable if we put our mind to it. And what we can also learn is that we needn't look forward in life with fear or anxiety, but instead, live for the moment and enjoy it. In the face of adversity, these men did what they loved best - having a kick about.