

# Grounds for a non-socialist future

With the UK General Election and the subsequent local elections now passed, it is instructive to look back and assess some of the consequences. Of these, the most obvious is the formal laying to rest of the Social Democratic Party. Essentially a breakaway from the Labour Party in its final days of unacceptable, fellow-travelling socialism, this was a plant all of leaves and flowers, without stem or roots. It is no more. R.I.P.

The S.D.P. stood for a 'forward' policy towards European integration, for a managed economy of state and private 'partnership', and for redistributive welfare spending. This is virtually the contemporary Labour Party's position. It also handily describes the Liberal Democrats. One might even add that under John Major's leadership the Conservative Party too shows clear signs of SDP infection. Social democracy lives.

It is Liberalism which has died. R.I.P. The old Liberal Party was supported by liberals devoted to land value taxation and free trade and also by impatient welfarists of the social democratic stamp. The position of the former group significantly eroded over the last quarter century. The attenuated stream of traditional liberalism has not survived the Liberal Party's dalliance with the SDP. The Liberal Democratic Party welds social democratic policy to the old Liberal structure. It is liberal in name only.

The Liberal Democrats are almost as politically marginalised as the old Liberals ever were. They are 20 in a House of 651. Most of their seats are rural, scattered round the Highlands, the Borders, and the South-West. Only three (Southwark and Bermondsey, Liverpool Mossley Hill, and Rochdale) are true city seats won from and held against the Labour Party. Whatever the SDP brought the Liberals, it certainly was not the stomach to challenge Labour in its run-down industrial and inner-city heartlands.

The Scottish Nationalists are no more successful than the Liberal Democrats in seeking to overthrow Labour in its strongholds, but at least they know that that is what they have to do, and they do keep trying. Their Welsh counterparts seem restricted to Welsh-speaking rural Wales. Except for three Northern Irish parties, all the other small-fry were beaten out of sight.

The contemporary party political scene offers little obvious comfort to the LVT supporter and the free trader. Amongst the Liberal Democrats, LVT survives, just, in much etiolated form as part (part!) of changes proposed in local government finance. Of course there will be old-style liberals who continue to work amongst the Liberal Democrats, and there are those

who find other aspects of a particular party's policy appealing in its own right - politics, after all, is not just about land, or even just about economics. For all the rest, though, is LVT as dead an issue as it might look?

Fortunately it is not. If a week is a long time in politics, a decade is even longer. Who, ten years ago, would have forecast Labour still solidly established but unable to win, successfully casting aside many of the accoutrements of socialism and now looking to a non-socialist future? Labour did not adopt socialism until after World War I, and still supported LVT and free trade well through the '30s. Having thrice since World War II disgraced itself with development taxes, is it too much to hope that it will again recognise that all land must bear an annual duty related purely to its

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site value, regardless of the use to which it is actually being put? The challenge is to distinguish land from capital, and to place reasoned exposition of a fundamental

case before the easy but now totally unconvincing rhetoric of soaking the rich and squeezing until the pips squeak.

It is also wrong to dismiss the possibility that a future Conservative government might reach for LVT. Just as the Trades Union Barons have lost predominance within Labour, so the Knights of the Shires no longer dictate to the Conservative Party. Dedication to the defence of what at law is still treated as private property, land, may give way to pragmatic acceptance that indeed it is different from man-made wealth. Free-market capitalists thrive all the more without the yoke of landlordism.

LVT is up for grabs. Who, when the next century starts in 2001, will have seized it? LVT supporters should work on the big parties.

## OURS NOT MINE! YOURS?

ARE YOU weary of politicians who talk of our farmers, our industry, our green belt, our exports, our film-makers, and so forth, as if we are all interested parties?

Personally I have no stake in anything agrarian. I have a little money in company shares, but scarcely sufficient to take a proprietorial view. As for the green belt, I am, like most, denied access to much of it, and never consider it mine. I derive not the slightest sense of personal ownership from any foreign sales statistics. What I want to hear is a politician legislating for collection of our land values for the public revenue.

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