



Tony Judge

The party poopers

It was bad luck for all three party conferences that this annual opportunity to showcase the goodies in store for the electorate was eclipsed in the media by the global mayhem in the financial markets. With banks collapsing overnight, thousands of job-losses, house values crashing, mortgages in turmoil, and inflation going through the roof, the only people likely to be watching our Ministers and wannabes claiming to have the right answers (“if only you will trust us”) would be those seeking to cut themselves off from harsh reality, whilst waiting for *Murder She Wrote* to take their minds off their worries.

The Liberal Democrats kicked off in Bournemouth. The curtain-raiser featured the MP for Torbay pushing another delegate headlong over a wall for saying on his blog that the said Honourable Member was for the chop come the next election. As this took place in full view of TV cameras, the irate assailant issued an immediate and grovelling public apology. The only other MP to attract media attention was the party’s eccentric-in-residence; Lembit Opik, who insisted on riding his electricity-powered skateboard up and down the promenade, apparently to gain support for his bid to be the party’s president.

The political hacks seemed to be impressed by the speech from Chris Huhne, the party’s shadow Home Secretary, a title that distinguishes him from the shady current incumbent of the Home Office, the delectable but presently unelectable Jacqui Smith. Mr Huhne devoted part of his address to a scathing attack on the efficiency of the Metropolitan Police. He must have been chatting to the party’s failed would-be Mayor of London, Brian Paddick, who used to be a close friend of Sir Ian Blair until their spectacular fall-out. Mr Huhne seems to think that the Met is suffering from having many highly promising middle-ranking officers who are being held back by the incompetents just above them. He told delegates that it was, “no good for an ambitious young officer to see dead wood prosper above him”. Mr Huhne hinted that if, thanks to a Lib-Dem landslide at the next election, or a post-poll deal

with the largest party, there would be a purge of under-performing senior officers. Actually, New Labour’s record for getting rid of failing chief and senior officers is quite impressive, thanks largely to the introduction, under the Tories, of fixed-term contracts.

The interesting part of the speech was Mr Huhne’s agenda for dealing with crime. He distanced the party from Labour and the Tories by promising to get rid of the “tough on crime” penal policies which have been enacted under Labour, but with few signs of being applied in the courts. For a start, he would scrap prison sentences for first-time burglars and muggers. He said that criminals sentenced to less than six-months were highly likely to re-offend because our prisons are “colleges of crime” Mr Huhne appears to confuse ‘first-time’ burglars and assailants as ‘first-time’ offenders. No way. The long line of statutory disposals of offenders coming to police notice has “imprisonment” at the end of a long avenue of misdemeanours.

The Tory Conference took place in Birmingham. I am impressed by the early performance of shadow Home Secretary Dominic Grieve. He eschews the simplistic populism of his predecessor and seems, to quote a Thatcherism, “a man we can do business with”. The problem with the present-day Tory law and order platform is that they have signed-up to a set of promises that at first sight look innovative but need to be revisited by a party that may form the next government, especially the daft notion of elected chief officers.

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