

**Russian Democracy: The Way Forward**  
**A Seminar On Democracy, Civil Liberties and Human Rights in Russia**

Fringe Meeting – Liberal Democrat Conference  
18<sup>th</sup> September 2006, 18.15 – 19.30  
Lancaster Suite, Hilton Brighton Metropole

**Speakers:**

Michael Moore MP – Shadow Foreign Secretary

Stephen Twigg – Director, The Foreign Policy Centre

Professor Bill Bowring – Barrister, Professor of Law, Birkbeck, University of London and Advisory Board Member, EU-Russia Centre

The EU-Russia Centre commenced its series of 2006 party conference fringe meetings in Brighton with a very successful event at the Liberal Democrat conference.

A total of 57 attendees participated at the lively and informative event which was co-hosted with the Foreign Policy Centre.

**Stephen Twigg**, Director of the Foreign Policy Centre, chaired the event and opened by introducing Professor Bill Bowring.

**Professor Bowring** gave a brief introduction to the EU-Russia Centre and its work and aims, and then commented on the long history that the UK shares with Russia. He mentioned the EU-Russia Centre's work in the UK, recent roundtables across Europe, conference participation and publications. He then gave a brief background on his work with a number of organisations, particularly the European Human Rights Advocacy Centre.

He then discussed some of the main problems facing Russia such as the “disastrous” demography (population rate falling by over 800,000/year), ecology, HIV/AIDS and poverty. He also discussed his view of what he called the unhealthy nature of the one-party system, political use of the judicial system (a statement supported by a EU rapporteur on the Michael Khodorkovsky case), as well as the new law clamping down on NGO operations (particularly those which are Chechnya related). He also mentioned the differences in approach between President Putin & Chechnya and Tony Blair & N. Ireland, in that engagement occurred in N.Ireland, whilst the person that Putin could have negotiated with was recently killed. In his view, This enhances the “limbo of lawlessness” and sense of impunity there is in Chechnya. Bowring closed his opening speech on the need to engage with the many excellent people in Russia - including politicians.

**Michael Moore MP** began by recognising that Russia is “a challenge for Liberals”. They know that they have to deal with the country, but it is difficult.

He welcomed the attendance of the Russian Democratic Party in the audience, and then discussed the sense of excitement, renewal and democratic revival that seemed to beckon in Russia following the fall of the Berlin wall. Since President Putin came to power, observers have seen a drift towards authoritarianism and “old-style” politics. Moore commented that it was a desperate state of international affairs that President Putin could turn to President Bush and say that he'd prefer not to have “Iraq-style democracy” – the West has let itself down.

He voiced concern over the fact that the Kremlin is eliminating other forms of opinion, citing restrictions on broadcasting, treatment of governors and human rights violations in the court system. Nevertheless, he did say the few successes in the court system could be a sign of progress.

The buoyancy of the Russian economy was also mentioned, as was the strategic importance of power in energy and the “tentacles” that were reaching Europe (ie. Gazprom & open energy markets). He stated that there was little evident reciprocity in this energy relationship (which would only get more high profile), and that “strategically, we don’t yet have all the boxes ticked.”

On human rights, Amnesty International has been successful in highlighting the problems faced, particularly on issues with journalists and the brutality of Chechnya – Moore believes that the government should speak out more on this latter issue. Generally, the UK needs to be more frank and robust about what it wants, and to be much more public in this stance. The current public stance by the Government has lacked resolve and encouraged the Kremlin, and this is an issue for both UK and EU foreign policy.

Moore queried how the UK could work with other EU nations (eg. France & Germany), and hoped that the EU-Russia Centre would be able to foster this debate. He also mentioned that there was a need to establish constructive links at all levels in Russian society and politics, but that at high levels, the EU should expect to (and push for) democratic principles to be fostered. He closed by voicing concerns about President Putin extending his term, and also that Liberals need to work out a true sense on what is important in this relationship.

The Q&A session opened with questions on the Far East, Siberia, anti-semitism and the environment.

**Professor Bill Bowring** referred to problems in relation to Siberia and the Far East, and the legalisation of Chinese immigration. For the region to survive and be part of the Russian Federation, he believes that it needs Chinese migration and this is an interesting challenge. As regards anti-semitism, he was recently at a conference in Stockholm where over half of the Russian attendees were Jewish. Anti-semitism was a problem, but on the other hand, President Putin is keen to be seen publicly around Jews. There is a wave of xenophobia across Russia which is showing dangerous tendencies.

On the environment, the fifth case taken on at the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) was an environmental one, concerning a family living near a steel mill. The ECHR is now taking on a variety of environmental cases, and environmental NGOs are very large in Russia. He stated that Yabloko is doing a very good job in this area (especially the young movement). Russia is also encouraging non-states to destabilise adjacent states (eg. Moldova), and this could become an “alternative CIS”.

**Michael Moore MP** commented that the relationship with China was very interesting, (especially concerning Darfur), and the Shanghai group is key. ‘We need to be watchful, despite the “end of old-style world power / hegemony international relations. We also need to look at the Caucasus, and the crude tactics in Georgia and Moldova. The treatment of Ukraine is also worrisome and is a clear signal of the newly assertive Russia that needs to be dealt with differently.”

The final Q&A session began with **Malcolm Bruce MP** referring to the Council of Europe and the fact that the Conservatives in the Council of Europe are led by a Russia “stooge”. He developed that it was difficult to get signatures in the House of Commons for any motions criticising Russia. He also said that the Liberal Democrats need to strengthen links with Russia.

**Alan Butt Philip** (Lecturer at Bath University) asked what points of pressure could be used by the EU and what opportunities for leverage there are in the relationship. He viewed that Kyoto and the move from dollars to euros could be key, with Russia playing the EU off against the US. The main pressure point could be FDI and natural resources.

Another attendee mentioned the energy deficit, and the fact that Russia was failing to invest in refurbishment or new fields. This will present a serious problem for Russia and the EU in 2010, so in a way, Russia is actually quite weak.

**Graham Hudson** (2005 Liberal Democrat candidate, Rutland and Melton) announced that he was involved in a project with the British Council and Russian universities – he asked if there were any positive stories to report, and about the next generation of young Russians.

The Chair of the International Relations Committee, **Robert Woodthorpe Browne**, mentioned his recent fact-finding mission in Russia with Charles Kennedy MP. Their conclusion was that the trappings of democracy were allowed, but real democracy is not evident. They work very closely with the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, and are especially concerned with the fact that oligarchs take the resources and don't invest in Russia – “pillaging natural resources”.

The final question concerned the view that interest in Russia by the West on energy was disproportionate compared to Saudi Arabia, and why this was the case.

**Stephen Twigg** thanked the attendees for their interest and stated that the FPC wants to take these questions forward. He added that the EU-Russia Centre is visiting all the party conferences.

**Michael Moore MP** stated that much effort was needed in the Council of Europe. The FPC's G8-scorecard inspired a lively meeting in Portcullis House, and discussed whether Russia was fit to lead the G8. He believes that this shows the economic leverage that can be used as Russia craves clout and respectability. He called for standards to measure and make the price of these aspirations higher.

The energy deficit issue is alarming and absent from the debate. "We need to develop relationships and engage on robust terms, but the attitude of the next generations depends on the period and the expectations set. Finally, the situation with the oligarchs is very worrisome, and as regards Saudi Arabia, we have been critical but could be more so."

**Professor Bowring** followed on, mentioning that the Saudi disparity of Western interest was due to the fact that the Russians are in the Council of Europe. He mentioned his speaking tour of Russian universities and the police academy, with Amnesty and the fact that he recognises that there are improvements being made. In a similar vein, there are now ECHR judgements made which form important precedents. He singled out Anatoly Kovler as a Russian judge in the ECHR who frequently votes against Russia.

As regards investment, Bowering claimed that it is not just a gas issue – basic infrastructure is a problem and desperately needs investment. Concerning Roman Abramovich, Bowering believes that he is popular as he is not posing a threat to the Kremlin. His purchases are made abroad, whilst Khodorkovsky got into trouble by recognising the problems, publicly addressing them, and investing in the country giving him power.

BP is the biggest investor in Russia, and therefore has significant leverage. As regards the next generation, they have grown up with access to the internet, with free and uncensored information. There has been an emergence of young movements (one has been banned, the National Bolsheviks – very xenophobic), and the Liberal Democrats should give their support to Yabloko and their youth movement.

**Stephen Twigg** closed the event with thanks and invited attendees to remain for networking and individual discussions.