

Thorny question reveals a tough road to future peace

Surviving 49 years in journalism without ever covering a political party conference is no mean achievement. I had interviewed those who spoke at them, pontificated on the motions carried and analysed the results – but never actually endured the deliberation process.

It was time to make amends, I decided to arrange a trip to Brighton to view the Lib Dems in their lair.

Such a report is particularly apposite for this column. After all, the party spent 18 years in power in Richmond upon Thames and last May recaptured the borough after a one term break.

Twickenham's MP Vincent Cable is now the deputy leader and shadow chancellor. Richmond Park's Susan Kramer is shadowing overseas development and Kingston's Ed Davey is director of communications.

Not forgetting that the local connections extend to the Upper House where among those ensconced are Susan's predecessor Jenny Tonge; Alan Watson, who fought three elections, paving the path for the borough's first Lib Dem MP and Tim Razzall and Sally Hamwee, who helped shape the early council administrations.

And in any case there are worse ways of spending four sunny September days than in a boutique hotel with a Channel view and a rainbow flag adorning the front window (very inclusive, Brighton).

The taxi driver who picked me up at the railway station set the scene: "Bit quiet here. The conference helps but there are not that many of them – not like when Labour are here. Never voted for them myself. Not sure what they are about".

His confusion would have intensified if he had joined me at the Guardian debate, obtusely entitled, What Next – Squeezed Again, which was chaired by Twickenham's Simon Hoggart – although in the event, it turned out to be as droll as any Radio Four News Quiz.

Things might have become clearer for my



The Malcolm Richards Column

chauffeur, however, had he also sat through the Face to Face in the afternoon when the Guardian's Michael White talked with leader Ming Campbell and the new man was able to demonstrate his sharp wit and political vision.

For pure entertainment value, the appearance of Charles Kennedy – billed to last 20 minutes but which ran twice that length – could not be capped. He arrived to a rousing standing ovation ("that was very heartening but I should make it clear I cannot offer any of you any cabinet posts or peerages any more").

I generally approve of the party's green credentials and awarded full marks to the last-a-lifetime jute bags handed out to all delegates to store their paperwork in (bring it back next year for you won't get another one).

Not so green were the thousands of A4 leaflets publicising everything from a

Friends of Israel Rally to Mental Health In The Workplace Forum that would have filled their disposable bags several times over.

Even recycling them must add a pinprick to the ozone layer hole, so it was to be hoped that those who had arranged publication attended the evening fringe session, Can the EU Switch Off Climate Change? in the Metropole Chartwell Room, when we were advised that unless there was drastic remedial action now, within 30 years the Arctic would have no ice at all during the summer months.

The next day belonged to Vincent Cable who addressed a full house (leaflets not required to entice folk here) and rose to the occasion when he proposed the tax reform policy paper. With his fabled gravitas he convinced a wavering assembly to accept the motion that moved the burden of taxation from income to environmental polluters and persuaded delegates that the idea of dropping 50 per cent tax levels was not a swing to the right.

The most stormy assembly was on Wednesday evening when a standing room only gathering in the tiny Osborne Room debated the Road to Peace in Lebanon and Palestine. (Baroness Tonge, who had been a speaker at a Tuesday night meeting on Justice for Palestinians, was present but did not contribute).

The high temperatures could be partially attributed to the hot night, low ceiling and full house, but a plentiful supply of red and white vino probably helped loosen the tongues and tempers.

It demonstrated the difficulties of discussing the Middle East even in the most civilised circles without eyes popping, mouths frothing.

It was a dismal reminder that if the conspicuously genteel party cannot arrange an exchange of views on the world's thorniest international question without hysterical interventions, the road map to peace is not going to be easy to achieve!