



THE LIBERAL DEMOCRAT APPROACH

LIBERAL DEMOCRAT BELIEFS AND VALUES

This booklet contains a slightly adapted form of the last chapter of the Liberal Democrat policy paper *The Opportunity to Succeed, the Power to Change*, approved by conference in September 2016. The full policy paper, which also examined the challenges the UK was likely to face over the following five years, and proposed an agenda for party policy development in the light of those challenges, can be found at <https://www.libdems.org.uk/autumn-conference-16-policypapers>.

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The Liberal Democrat approach: a summary

Liberal Democrats stand for **liberty**, the freedom of every individual to make their own decisions about how best to live their lives. We trust people to pursue their dreams, to make the most of their talents and to live their lives as they wish, free from a controlling, intrusive state and a stifling conformity. A free and open society that glories in diversity is a stronger society.

We stand for **equality**, for the right of everyone to be treated equally and with equal respect, whatever their personal characteristics; and in the duty of the state to create the conditions in which individuals and their communities can flourish.

We stand for **community**, for dispersing political and economic power as widely as possible, since government works best when it is closest to its citizens.

Since we believe in the worth of every individual, we are **internationalists** from principle, seeking cooperation, not confrontation, with Britain's neighbours.

And since we believe that future generations have the same rights as we do to live their lives in the ways they choose, we aim to create an **environmentally sustainable economy and society**, where people live in harmony with the natural world.

Holding these beliefs, Liberal Democrats are instinctively on the side of the individual against concentrations of power, free thinking, unimpressed by authority and unafraid to challenge the status quo.

The Liberal Democrat Approach

The Liberal Democrats are the heirs to two great reformist traditions in British politics – those of liberalism and of social democracy. Like all political philosophies, ours is based on a view of human nature. The Liberal Democrat view is an optimistic one. We believe in the essential goodness of humankind – that, given the opportunity, in most circumstances most people will choose to do good rather than harm.

Liberty

Liberal Democrats trust individuals to make their own decisions about how they live their lives; no one else, whether politicians, clerics or bureaucrats, should have the right to decide for them how they should live. The good society is one in which each individual has the freedom and the capacity to follow their own paths as they judge best.

‘The only part of the conduct of any one, for which he is amenable to society,’ wrote John Stuart Mill, the greatest of the Victorian Liberal thinkers, in *On Liberty*, ‘is that which concerns others. In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.’ This belief, which goes to the core of the Liberal philosophy, is why *On Liberty* is the symbol of the Presidency of the Liberal Democrats, a copy being

handed over to each new President at the start of their term of office.

It is the love of liberty above any other value that marks the liberal out as a liberal. It is why the last paper the party published on its core philosophy, in 2002, was called *It's About Freedom*. We believe in the right of people to pursue their dreams, to make the most of their talents and to live their lives as they wish.

Equality

Yet we also recognise that people's ability to realise their own goals is critically affected by their circumstances. Poverty and ill-health, poor housing and a degraded environment, and a lack of education all limit an individual's life chances and thereby restrict their capacity to be truly free. Social justice matters to Liberal Democrats; we believe that it is the role of the state to create the conditions in which individuals and their communities can flourish.

So government needs to provide decent public services and an adequate welfare safety net for those in need. In particular, we place a high priority on good-quality education, the enabler above all else in liberating people, developing their talents and capabilities and ensuring that they can live their lives as they wish.

Essential though these are, by themselves they are not enough. Inequality itself undermines the ability of

everyone, throughout society, to live a good life. Evidence clearly shows that the more unequal a society is the weaker it is: compared to societies with greater levels of equality, its citizens suffer from poorer health, lower educational attainments, higher crime rates, and lower levels of trust and co-operation. Government is justified, therefore, in reducing inequalities in income and wealth, and correcting other examples of inequality.

Our forebears in the great reforming governments of 1905–15 introduced graduated taxation and laid the foundations of the British welfare state. Liberal Democrats in the 2010–15 coalition government raised the income tax threshold, closed tax loopholes for the rich and introduced the pupil premium (extra resources for schools to teach pupils from poorer family backgrounds who lack the educational advantages enjoyed by children from better-off families).

This is one dimension of the Liberal Democrat commitment to equality: that, as far as possible, everyone should have the same opportunities to make what they want of their lives. The other dimension of equality is the right of everyone to be treated equally and with equal respect, whatever their personal characteristics, including race, gender, nationality, way of life, beliefs or sexuality. ‘Equality before the law’ was one of the great rallying cries of the Whigs, our seventeenth- and eighteenth-century ancestors; and 150 years ago, in

one of the few feminist classics to be written by a man, *The Subjection of Women*, John Stuart Mill argued ‘that the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes – the legal subordination of one sex to another – is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement’. As Liberal Democrats we still pursue this quest for equality today – for example through legislating for same-sex marriage and in aiming to close the gender and ethnic minority pay gaps.

Community

We believe in the right of people to live their lives as they wish, free to say what they think and to protest against what they dislike, regardless of who disagrees with them, free of a controlling, intrusive state and of a stifling conformity. A free society that glories in diversity is a stronger society. Societies, governments, bureaucracies and corporations work best when the beliefs and maxims of those at the top can be challenged and disproved by those below. Open societies learn and evolve; closed societies stagnate and fail.

Individuals of course do not exist in isolation; we are embedded in social relationships which help to give our lives meaning and fulfilment. We are all members of different communities, whether defined geographically or through work, tradition, culture, interests or family.

Communities enable individuals to join together in the pursuit of common goals or activities, in the defence of their views, or simply in enjoying each other's company; they are the main way through which people express their identity.

To function effectively, communities need to be able to exercise real political and economic power, taking decisions for themselves in the interests of their members. We therefore believe that government should act to encourage the development of thriving communities – decentralising power, for example through the establishment of local banks or community energy cooperatives, tenants' management of social housing, or mutual structures at work, employee participation and trade unions.

We recognise, however, that communities can sometimes be illiberal and oppressive, restricting individual freedom in the name of tradition or the pressure to conform. We believe in a tolerant and open society, in which every individual has a free choice of which communities, if any, to join or to leave and of what identity or identities to express.

Markets and the state

In general, societies which base their economies on free markets and free trade are themselves freer and fairer: markets are generally better than bureaucracies

in matching demand and supply, allocating scarce resources and rewarding innovation and entrepreneurship. Yet there are many ways in which markets can fail. Large corporations too often abuse their power and are frequently incapable of self-regulation (as we saw in the banking crisis). Left to themselves, markets cannot provide public goods such as the protection of the natural environment. In some cases, such as health care, where markets could deliver services, outcomes may be more equitable if they are provided through non-market solutions.

A liberal society therefore requires an active and interventionist state – to regulate markets, to deliver public goods and to adjust market outcomes to create a more equal society. Yet government failure can be as much a threat as market failure: it is easy for governments to become remote and unresponsive to their citizens, to be intolerant of dissent and difference and to interfere in individuals' lives, for example in the name of national security.

Democracy and decentralisation

Liberal Democrats approach this problem in two ways. First, by placing boundaries on the ability of governments – or corporations, or the media, or other individuals – to interfere in the lives of citizens, though strong and effective codes of human rights and civil

liberties and through upholding the rule of law free of arbitrary political interference. The presence of Liberal Democrats in coalition ensured that the Human Rights Act was retained, and that the Conservatives were prevented from introducing covert surveillance through the 'snoopers' charter'.

Second, by ensuring that state institutions are responsive to the needs and wishes of individuals. This includes ensuring that they function democratically – for example through replacing the current voting system, which delivers governments which do not reflect the way in which people vote; through reforming party funding, to ensure that big business, or big unions, cannot buy the election result; and through replacing an appointed with an elected House of Lords. This also includes situating political power at the lowest level consistent with effective government, since the more local an institution is the more likely it is to be responsive to local needs and circumstances. This implies decentralising power to local government and to the nations and regions of the UK.

This approach is fundamental to a liberal society because, for Liberal Democrats, democracy is much more than just a mechanism for counting votes. It means a spirit of equality, openness and debate, a coming together to decide our future fairly and freely, without being dominated by entrenched interests or the

power of money. It means a system in which every citizen is empowered to make their voice heard and to participate in the decisions that shape their lives. It is the bedrock of an open society. A state that supports freedom has to be a democratic state, in which politics is not an activity confined to a tiny elite but something everyone can take part in, as and when they choose. As four-times Liberal Prime Minister William Gladstone put it, in the words inscribed in the entrance to the National Liberal Club: 'The principle of Liberalism is trust in the people, qualified only by prudence. The principle of Toryism is mistrust of the people, qualified only by fear.'

More broadly, we aim to disperse power as widely as possible throughout society. This affects, most clearly, the institutions of government, including public services, which function more effectively when those who use them, not just those who deliver them, are involved in decision-making. Our belief in the dispersal of power also affects many other aspects of modern life, including access to justice, corporate governance (including the rights of employees and shareholders and the obligations of companies to local communities), and the distribution of media ownership. Every individual should have the right and the opportunity to challenge excessive concentration of power, and the abuse of power, whoever or whatever it derives from.

There is no general answer to the question of how

much government intervention is enough, or how big the state should be. This is because of the need to deal both with market failure and with government failure, and because the appropriate level of state involvement, and the size of the state, varies so widely over time and across areas of activity. Differences of opinion over this question lie at the root of the disagreements between 'economic liberals' and 'social liberals'. Economic liberals (sometimes called 'classical liberals') emphasise the dangers of an over-mighty state, and prefer small and non-interventionist government, while social liberals place more stress on the need for state action, for example to redress inequality or tackle climate change, and therefore prefer more active and interventionist government, constrained primarily through decentralisation and restraints such as a written constitution. In reality, though, individual liberals' views range over a broad spectrum rather than being separated into two firm camps.

Internationalism

Since Liberal Democrats believe in the worth of every individual, we are internationalists from principle, rather than nationalists who define their nation or race in opposition to others and thrive on division and intolerance. We believe that the free movement of people and the free exchange of ideas, goods and

services across national boundaries enrich people's lives, broaden their horizons and help to bring communities together in shared understanding. And just as individuals' rights and relations are most effectively protected when they are underpinned by a system of law, so relations between the peoples of the world are most successful and fair when they are based on law, and a system which is as democratic as possible.

We are also internationalists for good pragmatic reasons, because some goals are too big for nation-states to achieve on their own: guaranteeing peace and security, limiting climate change and promoting a healthy environment, standing up to corporate power and spreading prosperity around the world. This is why we have always supported, and will continue to champion, the European project, not least because it has brought peace to a continent that has historically been racked by war. Above all else, it was a shared belief in the value of Britain's membership of the European Community that helped bring the Liberal Party together with the Social Democratic Party in the Alliance of the 1980s, and then to merge to form the Liberal Democrats.

We also argue for effective international institutions, such as the United Nations and its agencies. In an increasingly uncertain world, the security and prosperity of the UK and its citizens requires cooperation with the country's neighbours, not withdrawal from them.

Environmentalism

Our belief in the empowerment of individuals is not limited to the current generation; future generations have the same rights as we do to live their lives in the ways they choose. Climate change, pollution and the degradation of the natural environment pose some of the greatest threats to the well-being and freedom of future generations – and, increasingly, to our own lives – that modern society has ever seen. We need to act at home and internationally to promote environmentally sustainable ways of doing things – as did Liberal Democrats in coalition, in establishing the world’s first Green Investment Bank, supporting the growth of renewable energy and setting ambitious climate targets.

Our politics

We recognise, of course, that some of the beliefs described above can conflict with others. When does an individual’s right to express their opinion cause harm to others? To what extent should government interfere in the rights of employers in order to protect the rights of their employees? When does government action to reduce inequality cease to be liberating and start to be unjust? There is no general answer to these questions; it depends on the particular circumstances of any given case. The resolution of these conflicts is the proper role of politics. So how we do our politics – our style and

approach – is just as important as are our beliefs and values. This is why political parties feel very different from one another even when they support the same policies.

Liberal Democrats' style, whether in government, in our local communities or within our own party, is to be this: instinctively on the side of the individual against concentrations of power, whether state or private; tolerant of differences and open to new thinking; pluralist, aware that we have no monopoly of wisdom, not afraid to work with others, seeking cooperation rather than confrontation; independent, free of vested interests or class bias; participatory, in our own organisation and operation; honest, not afraid to put forward unpopular policies; thoughtful, not dogmatic; and, finally – and perhaps most characteristically – free thinking, unimpressed by authority and unafraid to challenge the status quo.



This Pocket Guide sets out the Liberal Democrat approach – the Liberal Democrat beliefs and values of liberty, equality, community, internationalism and environmentalism. It describes our party's approach to the role of markets and the state, to democracy and decentralisation and to the way in which we do our politics.

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