

## **Liberal Democrats Abroad – A Short History**

### **By Dr Sue Collard, Sussex University**

The Liberal Democrats (LibDems) have always prided themselves on being an internationalist party. The party are members of Liberal International (LI) <https://liberal-international.org/>, a worldwide federation of liberal parties as well as the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), a European network of liberal and liberally-minded parties (<https://www.libdems.org.uk/international>).

The Liberal Democrat party has a federal structure consisting of three State Parties: England, Scotland and Wales. The basic unit is the Local Party which can consist of several branches. The Local Parties in Scotland and Wales belong direct to their national State Parties. In England there are eleven Regions to which these Local Parties belong. Historically, outside the UK, there had been a Local Party based in Brussels called Brussels and Europe Liberal Democrats (BELD), which had been animated mainly by members working in the EC/EU institutions.

After the 2010 election and the formation of the coalition government between Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, the party launched for the first time an organisation for LibDems living outside the UK called Liberal Democrats Abroad (LDA).<sup>1</sup> This was formally launched in September 2010 by Nick Clegg and run by Paul Speller who was the Head of the LibDem International Office in London. Speller had plans to set up local entities in eight target places: Australia, Cyprus, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Singapore, Spain and the USA. The idea was that they would expand and develop networks with a view to increasing registration for the 2015 election, presumably with a specific view to targeting the increased number of constituencies that had become marginals in the 2010 election.

This was the first time that the LibDems had specifically set out to target the registration of sympathetic electors outside the UK as Labour and the Conservatives already had been doing for some time. LDA started to send newsletters and a model constitution was prepared, with the global operation coordinated from the International Office in London. However,<sup>2</sup> after only a couple of years, Speller's successor as Head of International Office decided to concentrate the work of his small team on working with the Westminster Foundation instead. As LDA had few voluntary activists at the time, it very soon disbanded.

However, following the 2016 EU Referendum, there was a significant and spontaneous surge of new membership applications, mainly from people living in the EU outside the UK, all of whose membership requests are processed by party HQ in London and sent on to the relevant Local Party. The membership in Europe quadrupled to about 1,500, prompting the creation of the first branch of BELD called LibDems in France (1 Feb 2017) which comprised about 500 members, by itself in the top 40 of all the Local LibDem Parties in size. This was followed by a

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Liberal Democrat Voice, 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2010 <https://www.libdemvoice.org/liberal-democrats-abroad-launches-today-21293.html>

<sup>2</sup> Internal party archives shared with this author by George Cunningham, currently Chair of LibDems Overseas (2018, 2019) and formerly Chair of BELD (2016).

second branch of BELD in Luxembourg (about 40 members), triggering a reappraisal of BELD's status. An initial proposal was put forward in 2016 to give it status as a region on the same terms as those in the UK.<sup>3</sup>

The party's 2016-17 review finally decided to place all members living abroad under the authority of the party's Federal International Relations Committee (FIRC) (a committee of the Federal Board) in London. The FIRC Lib Dems Abroad subcommittee comprises of two coordinating committees, one for Europe and one for Overseas, which comprise the Chairs of all the relevant Local Parties. The Federal Board approved these changes (Dec 2017). BELD Local Party was renamed LibDems in Europe in January 2018 and approval was given for the establishment of LibDems in France in April 2018. The new LibDems Abroad has three Local Parties: LibDems in Europe (formerly BELD), LibDems in France (formerly a BELD branch) and LibDems Overseas (formed during 2018 from scratch as no Local Party existed beforehand for members outside Europe).

These three local parties can be found on <https://www.libdems.org.uk/abroad>, each of them having their own separate website and constitutions adapted to their individual circumstances, approved by LibDem HQ. LibDems in Europe have currently around 1100 members with national coordinators in about 10 European countries; LibDems in France about 600 members and a series of Regional Coordinators across the country; while LibDems Overseas have about 400 members in 40 countries<sup>4</sup>. Altogether, LDA therefore has just over 2,000 members worldwide, around 2% of the LibDems' total membership, plus around 1,000 supporters. It is financed through an HQ budget line from a proportion of its own membership fees. Members do not have to have UK citizenship to join. The new LDA relies on a hardcore of motivated activists and only depends on HQ for support facilities to enable their work.

Activities of the Local Parties abroad consist of campaigning for Britons abroad to benefit from the establishment of worldwide parliamentary constituencies and enduring enfranchisement (Votes for Life), to encourage them to register to vote, supporting candidates in parliamentary elections in the UK. More recently, LibDems in Europe and LibDems Overseas formulated a policy document addressing the needs of Britons resident abroad [https://www.libdemsoverseas.com/policy\\_paper](https://www.libdemsoverseas.com/policy_paper). Additionally, LibDems in France has produced a policy document to support the definition of British Citizenship as the basis for parliamentary representation under the Declaration of Human Rights <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>. All three local parties also engage in a range of activities in the context of Liberal International and ALDE.

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<sup>3</sup> These details of restructuring the party abroad are based on interviews with Paul Fisher, Chair of LibDems France, and George Cunningham, Chair of LibDems Overseas in April 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Lib Dems Overseas North American branch was formed in April 2020.