

**Liberal Democrat Strategy**

Consultation Paper – Spring 2017

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# Introduction

**The Liberal Democrats exist to build a liberal society and a liberal world. We achieve that by fighting elections and through wider campaigning to build a movement that changes society.**

“We know the Britain we love and the Britain we want to build – an open, tolerant, united Britain, innovative and ambitious, generous and outward-looking, confident and optimistic.”

*Tim Farron, 19 March 2017*

This paper sets out a strategy to realise Tim Farron’s vision. It is the basis for widespread discussion throughout our party, which will lead to a motion for the September 2017 Bournemouth Conference. Please read it, discuss it with colleagues and tell us what you think, so that the proposals which come to the conference reflect the widest possible range of views within the party.

Speaking at the York Conference in March 2017, Tim Farron explained his analysis of UK politics today:

“A century ago, the tectonic plates of British politics shifted dramatically.

The Liberal Party, one of the great parties of government, was split. It had lost its sense of purpose. The country had changed around it and it no longer had the answers.

In just a few years the Labour Party went from fewer than 10 seats to displacing the Liberals as the main opposition to the Conservatives. From there the Labour Party went on to become one of the natural parties of government, able to reshape our country in profound ways.

And today, you can clearly see and feel those tectonic plates moving again.

The old debate between left and right, capitalism versus socialism, has been overtaken by a new debate about the sort of country we are.

We may, for now, be small in numbers in the House of Commons, but that didn’t stop the Labour Party a century ago and it will not stop us now.

Let me be explicit about what I want us to achieve:

I want us to replace the Labour Party as the main opposition to the Conservatives…

**…so that we can replace the Conservatives as the Government of our country**”.

This is a bold vision, which needs a bold strategy to deliver it.

# Political strategy

## Creating a new political spectrum

People are angry about the failure of politics to connect with their everyday lives. They want politicians who respect them and involve them in finding answers that work. Liberal Democrats believe that we can create a new politics which addresses these concerns and is honest about the choices our society must make.

A central part of our strategy is to benefit from **replacing the old left versus right political spectrum**. Instead of politics so often being seen as left versus right, we want and will benefit from it becoming a choice between an open, forward-looking society versus a closed, backwards looking one – and with the Liberal Democrats at the heart of the former option as the leading voice for tolerance, community, internationalism and liberalism.

In **Scotland**, our commitment to those values means that we have a unique position as the only pro-EU, pro-UK party and our strategy must reflect that. If a further divisive independence referendum is held, the party will campaign to stay in the UK.

In **Wales**, we are the party standing for the EU and for Home Rule; UKIP in Wales must be undermined as they have a substantial presence in the Welsh Assembly.

## Building a larger core vote

There is a clear space on the electoral map, more open now than it has been for many years, for our liberal voice. To fill that space successfully, we need to create a large, durable base of support for the party, based on attracting people to our values and far larger than the current 5% or so who see themselves as long-term, loyal supporters of the party. We need instead a much larger **core vote** to match the higher core votes of our main rivals.

We will succeed in doing this as we find ways of **clearly communicating our values** – and as we find symbols as powerful as Trump's Mexican wall but which symbolise bringing people together, not driving them apart with nationalistic antagonisms.

Building a larger core vote means a significant departure from our past approaches. We were often hesitant to take positions a vocal group would disagree with. Now, we need to speak up for our own values, unafraid of opposition from those who do not.

We were also predominantly reactive: see where local campaign teams with talent and success start to emerge, then support them to further success. It made for a diverse set of winnable and won, seats but with less in common amongst our supporters than necessary to build a coherent, durable basis of support.

## Winning over liberals from other parties

Theresa May has made a clear political choice to respond to the Brexit referendum outcome by delivering departure from the EU, regardless of the consequences for our economy and our society. Her party wants to make Britain less open and less generous.

The Labour party's ability to do anything is disfigured most powerfully by a civil war which is a symptom of their failure to stand for any coherent set of beliefs and policies. And it has now chosen to occupy a closed-minded view of Britain's place in the world.

Liberal voices in both Labour and the Conservatives are quiet, on the defensive and often slipping away out of politics. Other parties, including the Scottish Nationalist Party and Plaid Cymru, share some aspects of our view of the world, but in other ways are shockingly restrictive and do not give a priority to promoting liberal values.

We commit ourselves to engaging with and winning over to ourselves some of those currently active in other parties. We will identify those who share or might come to share our values and bring them into our movement.

There will be some who are not yet ready to make that final move of party label or who agree with us on key issues but wish to remain in their current party. How should we seek to work with such people? Should we seek **common ground on key policies** and to **campaign together** on the issues that matter to us all? Might that co-operation go as far as informal electoral cooperation? There are some in our party and others who advocate formal electoral pacts – that will be an important decision for the party to make.

## A political and social movement

Winning more votes and securing greater electoral success will tell people about the changes we want and begin to make those changes. Our ambitions, however, go much further. We aim to create a **political and social movement** to stand for and create those changes.

That means changing the ways in which people look at the world and work with each other to make it better. We want people to have much more power over the things that affect their lives – as individuals, as families and in their communities. That means working together – learning, discussing, campaigning, challenging and making the compromises which include everyone in decisions.

We must **demonstrate our values in practice** – working as a political party and also building coalitions to help people take and use power, so they can influence their own communities and foster a tolerant diversity of views and ideas.

As Liberal Democrats, we make this commitment to **community politics** - working with people in their everyday lives to help them take and use power in all the communities of which they are part. We believe that, if people have power, they use it responsibly and that they grow as individuals by increasing their power and influence.

**We want people to take back control** – not just through casting an occasional vote, but every day and in every way that matters to them.

The last year has seen the growth of a different view of society which is fundamentally opposed to our values of openness, tolerance and helping each person to take and use power. That view has been winning at the ballot box. The approach of putting up barriers, closing down opportunities and setting people against each other is in direct opposition to our values of openness, internationalism, tolerance and empowering every individual.

We need to say powerfully what we believe, winning support from many more people – especially those who share our liberal values but do not yet see us as their natural political voice.

This is both a challenge and a huge opportunity. This new political choice is as significant as the realignment in British politics in the early 20th century which resulted in the two-party Labour-Conservative system.

This realignment is not about trying to trade blocks of votes with other parties; it is about **remaking the political party system**, with the Liberal Democrats at one end of the spectrum and whatever emerges out of the Conservative Party’s right-wing and UKIP at the other.

Such a realignment leaves Labour stranded, split between its very different open and closed camps, those who, for example, welcome European neighbours, see the benefits of immigration and wish to preserve our civil liberties – and those who do not. A realignment which leaves Labour split is vital for our aim of replacing Labour, which in some cases will mean winning seats directly off Labour and in other places mean winning votes off Labour that help gains seats from other parties.

## Creating campaigning coalitions

The realignment we seek will involve people coming together to fight for principles and causes in which we believe. We are part of the wider community of liberal and progressive people who want to make the world a more open, tolerant and diverse place, to decrease rampant inequalities and promote economic and social justice.

This means **forming and supporting campaigning coalitions to create change now**. This is particularly important for political reform, which is so essential to helping people to take power over their own lives. It is also so hard to deliver without genuinely widespread societal and cross-party support.

Bringing about the society we want to see is not only about winning and using the power of elected office, it is also about cooperating with others to bring about wider social change, securing success away from as well as at the ballot box and helping people take power over their own lives. Broader liberal campaigning and electoral campaigning are mutually supportive approaches; succeeding at one helps secure the other.

## Helping people take power

"Take back control" is a fundamental Liberal Democrat message. Helping people to take power over their lives means **creating powerful communities** – and it means cooperation between nations so that people have more power over international and global forces.

It means working with people to help them to take and use power, having a full role in communities and helping them to learn the habits and techniques of participation and to create the community institutions through which they take decisions about things that affect them in all the diverse forms of modern communities.

Our society needs to rediscover the many ways in which people come together to campaign, negotiate, compromise and take a different sort of decisions – which come from and are rooted in communities, instead of being handed down. That will involve working with a wide range of organisations, institutions and campaign groups and helping them to make those bodies work.

We are committed to helping people to learn the habits and techniques of influence and participation. We are active and will become more so in **helping liberal colleagues** and others to take leadership and supporting roles in all these communities.

## Engaging people with honest choices

A liberal society is based on open discussion and argument which seeks to change minds and bring people together in agreeing what’s right for them and their communities. We want to be **a bottom-up movement of free people**, not a top-down party which tells people what is good for them.

Liberal Democrats look to engage all those people in a new politics which makes policy options clear and engages them in the big debates about choices. That means being **honest about difficult choices** and trade-offs between policies, for instance between tax levels and public services. We will foster debates which enable people to decide their own priorities.

As a serious political party, the Liberal Democrats will have detailed policies on all the subjects which affect people’s lives. In future, however, we will concentrate on setting out the big policy choices our country faces and showing where Liberal Democrats stand. This is not the place for a shopping list of policies. This strategy paper is not the point of decision for our policy priorities or our manifesto, but a few examples will help to give the flavour of our thinking.

Economic policy is the bedrock of political decision-making. It is not understood by most people – including politicians – because it seems too complex, too difficult to control and led by sinister, uncontrollable forces. We will make these debates comprehensible so that people can make choices between clear alternatives. That includes how we organise and pay for welfare, social care, unemployment and disability insurance, and the treatment of ill-health.

We will clarify the big choices about the environment and climate change so that our country and the international bodies of which we remain part can address the disaster our grandchildren will face.

We will be the party of good pay for honest work and businesses that are entrepreneurial, successful and responsible. Work remains defined by a bosses/workers mentality with little idea of how everybody in an enterprise can share power and increase satisfaction and productivity, protect workers and share profits. We will set out our ideas to change that power relationship.

We know that ill-health is created by the environments in which people live and their circumstances. Powerlessness at work, at home and in political decision-making is the single most important cause of bad health. We will help people to live good and healthy lives with health and care services that are there when they needed and with the resources they need.

This programme for change will involve new political and governmental institutions which are designed to make people’s choices matter. That’s not about top-down structures which satisfy some general principles. It is about votes, all of which really count; devolution which gives power to communities and gives all parts of the country an equal chance of prosperity and development; and government structures which enable open, collaborative decision-making.

# Organisational strategy

We are setting out to create a political movement of sufficient size, resilience and skill to be able to change the pattern of British politics. In particular, building a core vote and replacing Labour has implications for where the party needs most to grow, which does not neatly match where our organisation has traditionally been strongest.

It is a challenging goal that can be achieved if all parts of the party work together, building on the priorities in our strategy and adapting them to the circumstances of their nation, region and locality. Whatever the level of their involvement, any member should be able to look at this strategy and see ways they can contribute to its success.

Three objectives run through our organisational priorities:

1. The necessary steps to **win more seats** in those elections whose voting systems require tight targeting of wards and constituencies;
2. Creating **a broader base of popularity**, to build our vote and activity across the whole country, to support targeting, and to do well under the other electoral challenges across the UK, such as list PR elections and first past the post contests across large areas; and
3. Successfully **working with** **people who are not yet part of our party**, as set out in our political strategy.

There are many steps that the party should take to achieve this. However, a meaningful strategy requires choices and priorities. This section concentrates on the most effective priorities for achieving our strategy.

Success in each of the above three objectives will help achieve the others. Sometimes there will be difficult choices to make, such as between regenerating the grassroots and giving further help to target seats. But for sustained success, we need all three and they can be achieved in mutually supportive ways.

## Increasing our capacity

The huge growth in the party’s membership and our ability in recent months to beat Labour for fundraising from private individuals are a promising sign of how we can grow in order to be able to resource our ambitions.

Membership growth is a vital focus for all parts of the party. Tim Farron originally set a target to have 100,000 members. With the last published Conservative membership total under 150,000, we could raise our sights to **overtaking the Conservative Party’s membership** for the first time ever.

We will build on the influx of new members to spread our organisation throughout the country and generate the teams of helpers who can support winning target seat campaigns all around the country.

Our fundraising must become even more successful and we must **embed a culture of fundraising at all levels**. Fundraising is too often treated as an incidental consequence – “the social event was great, and it also happened to raise some money” – rather than a priority itself.

Staff will play a key role in much of this, and their efforts will be most effective when supplemented by the skills and time of members, many of whom have highly relevant expertise thanks to their jobs. The combined computer coding expertise of members, for examples, dwarfs what we can afford to employ at party HQs.

Greater capacity also comes from **keeping our knowledge at the cutting edge**, especially through spreading the use of experimentation and testing to learn what really works – such as via a shared depository of campaign evaluation test results so that the scattered knowledge which exists in the party can be collated and accumulated.

## Running issue-led campaigns

There is much more to campaigning than the immediate pursuit of votes in the weeks running up to a polling day. We must run a small number of **carefully selected ‘thematic’ campaigns**, covering a range of issues and aimed at broader objectives such as securing a change in legislation and shifting public opinion in a liberal direction.

These will provide a way to **demonstrate our values**, build our core vote and enable coalition building with liberals and progressive forces outside the Liberal Democrats. Direct party support for these campaigns will often be concentrated in those winnable areas most immediately up for election, but the resources and momentum behind the campaigns can be spread across the whole country.

Such campaigns should be for **everyone in the party**: elected representatives, local parties, other party bodies and individual members. The most successful pressure groups provide ways for individuals to act directly as well as through their structures to maximise their campaigning pressure – and they maximise the numbers of members and supporters who take part in their campaigns.

## Giving all members the right tools and skills

Everyone in the party should have access to **a full set of high-quality tools and resources**, suitable for the tasks, easy to use and with any administrative or financial barriers reduced to the absolute minimum necessary.

This will not be easy because there are many obstacles - for all sorts of understandable reasons. We charge people and party bodies to use many of the key tools we rely on. Access to information is often linked to membership of a particular party grouping (frequently with a price tag). Paper and digital templates may come empty of content, requiring a big leap in editorial capability to use them. Much of our training is dependent on having the time and money to come to conferences.

Reducing and removing such obstacles will require a sustained programme of collaborative reform. It will be worth it for the ability, energy and capacity that it unlocks, both for people to campaign in their own areas and also, where appropriate, for shifting to help in target seats as different polling days near.

It will also be worth it for the assistance wider use of shared tools will bring for meeting our **compliance requirements**, helping with the major changes we need to take shared responsibility for across the whole party as the new data protection rules come into force next year.

We will also **help local leaders find their own distinctive voices**, representing who they are and speaking the language of the people they want to represent. More broadly, we must help give members the right skills to be effective advocates for our beliefs – especially members who have not come through an education system in which public debate about political issues is the norm.

In Scotland and Wales, the opportunity to **develop skills at campaigning in regional seats and those that are subject to PR** must be developed, as it must also in London with its PR elections too.

Finally, we should remember how much knowledge there is which seems commonplace to long-standing members but is unknown to newer members. It is already 20 years since the last time the Liberal Democrats were in opposition to a Conservative government, for example. Sharing – and updating in the light of new expertise and new events – our **knowledge, habits and traditions** will require sustained attention.

## Improving our diversity

Properly reflecting those we seek to represent will unlock **new skills, knowledge and perspectives** for us as well as demonstrating to voters that we live our values. The most prominent aspect of this is the make-up of our elected Parliamentarians, but it is an issue at all levels, including the many ways of participating outside seeking elected office.

Organisations which used to be dominated by middle-class white men have found increasingly effective ways to start to change that – and found the benefits it brings in being more successful.

We must track diversity across the party much more accurately, and then **deploy the best practice widely developed outside the party** to improving it: from the welcomes new members receive, through the ways we run meetings and to the ways we select candidates. This will include helping members to build confidence in their own campaigning and leadership skills.

Building our core vote also needs to be done in ways that improve the diversity of our supporter and membership base, and tap into the diaspora communities who have made their homes in the UK. Doing this will help create the right conditions for further improving our diversity.

## Smarter, simpler organisation

The time of our members and highly stretched staff is valuable. Yet so much of it is taken up by internal administration and meetings. The Federal Party’s Governance Review and subsequent steps such as the current English Party review are doing good work and it is not the place of this strategy to set out some new masterplan from on high.

What we can do, however, is to **give all parts of the party more flexibility** to achieve the right structures for themselves. In some English areas that may mean using county-level organisation more. It might mean allowing local parties to share officers with specific technical skills (such as treasurers). It can also mean using completely new approaches, such as the brilliant way in which the Liberal Democrat Newbies group on Facebook has become a successful part of the welcoming process for new members.

We need also to ensure we have the right digital tools to help with **tasks beyond campaigning** – such as local party administration and casework – reducing administrative burdens and making compliance with the law easy.

# The consultation process

This paper sets out our overall strategic vision. We have not gone into detail about our view of a liberal society, because it is well set out in the Preamble to our Party Constitution, our paper *It’s About Freedom*, the 2016 paper *The Opportunity to Succeed, the Power to Change* and Your Liberal Britain’s writing competition.

It forms part of the new strategy process which the Liberal Democrat Federal Board oversees. This paper is a draft for genuine consultation. This draft will be revised following that consultation and put to our autumn Federal Conference in September 2017 for debate and vote.

There are some big new ideas which underpin our approach and this short paper cannot go into detail about all of them. We have asked members of the group who prepared the paper to set out more detail on some of the most important of them. This includes the idea of political positioning, the new way of thinking about politics (open/closed rather than left/right), the meaning behind setting out to replace the Labour Party, building a core vote, community politics, and the implications for Scotland, Wales and different parts of England. These short essays will appear on Liberal Democrat Voice over the next few weeks and will then be collated and available to members on the party’s main website.

There is also an online survey emailed to all party members for whom we have a working, non-opted out email address. The questions in the survey are also set out below. Our questions focus on the broad choices which inform the draft strategy. There is a final question which can tell us what you think about any significant parts of a strategy which you think the earlier questions don’t cover.

In addition to the survey, we encourage all parts of the party – local parties, state parties, regional parties, Associated Organisations, other party committees and more informal groupings – to organise discussions. All these parts of the Party and each and every member will share the responsibility for implementing the agreed strategy and the Party and we want to know what you can do to help as well as what you think about our ideas.

If you would like a guest speaker from the Federal Board or the team involved in drafting this document at such a discussion event, please email president@libdems.org.uk and we will do our best to make someone available.

## Key consultation questions

The wide-ranging nature of a political party’s strategy means it is easy to concentrate too much on details, losing sight of what really makes or breaks an effective strategy. Our consultation questions therefore concentrate on the core issues and assumptions which underpin our emerging ideas. The strategy we adopt and the actions we then take will be very different depending on the combination of answers we agree together.

We strongly encourage you to take part in the online survey which accompanies this paper, but you can otherwise address the questions below and email them to president@libdems.org.uk.

1. Should we encourage and welcome a realignment of British politics along an open versus closed political spectrum with the Liberal Democrats at the heart of the open end?
 YES
 NO
 Comments:
2. Do you agree with the emphasis on building a larger core vote for the party?
 YES
 NO
 Comments:
3. What is your view on cooperation with other parties and people in them?
	1. Campaign with individuals when we agree YES/NO
	2. Work with individuals on developing ideas and policies YES/NO
	3. Campaign with other parties when we agree YES/NO
	4. Work with other parties to develop shared policies YES/NO
	If yes, which parties?
	5. Consider formal electoral pacts with other parties YES/NO
	If yes, which parties?
	6. Do you have any other comments about working with other parties?

		1. This strategy talks about both winning elections and also campaigning with others outside of elections to achieve liberal change now. Which of the following comes closes to your view?

Winning elections is…
 much more important
 more important
 about equal in importance
 less important, or
 much less important than
campaigning with others outside of elections to achieve liberal change.

Further comments:

* + 1. This strategy also talks about the importance both of winning elections where we can in the short run and building up our support and capacity to be able to win others too in the long run. Which of the following comes closes to your view?

Winning elections is the short run…
 much more important
 more important
 about equal in importance
 less important, or
 much less important than
building the party for the longer term.

Further comments:

* 1. How do you think the balance between concentrating on the factors mentioned earlier in this question should vary between different parts of the party (e.g. between the federal, state and local parties)? Please comment:
1. Do you think it is sensible to set a target of over-taking the Conservative Party’s membership? YES
 NO
 Comments:
2. How can we make fundraising a core part of the party’s culture? Please comment:
3. Do you agree with the idea of running issue-led (thematic) campaigns for all parts of the party to take part in and focused on achieving liberal aims in the way a non-party campaigning group would?
 YES
 NO
 If so, how would you make a success of them?
4. Improving the party’s diversity at all levels is a major priority for our growth. What are the most important things we need to do to achieve this? Please comment:
5. How should the strategy reflect the differing political environments across the nations of the UK? Please comment:
6. Are there any other key strategic decisions for the party which this list has not covered? Please comment:

You do not need to be restricted by the questions – if what you want to say doesn’t fit the questions, don’t worry – just tell us your views.

## How to respond to this survey

This survey will remain open for submissions **until 12 noon on Monday 15th May 2017**.

If you have an active, non-opted out email address, you will have received an online survey with a personalised link by email from our Party President, Sal Brinton, on **6th April 2017**. This is the most effective way of responding.

If you feel a fuller response to the above questions is required, or you feel more comfortable responding to this survey in writing, please feel free to email your reply to:

president@libdems.org.uk

or send it by post to:

Chris Adams

Governance Officer

Liberal Democrat Headquarters

8-10 Great George Street

London SW1P 3AE

If you have any questions regarding this survey, please feel free to email president@libdems.org.uk.