



# **Liberal Democrat Party Strategy Consultation**

Autumn Conference 2017



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# Introduction

Almost every day brings us a reminder how important a strong liberal and democratic voice is in British, and international, politics. There is a vital role for the Liberal Democrats to fill and this strategy consultation is about how we should set about doing just that.

Under the new party rules introduced last year, the Federal Board (FB) is responsible for overseeing our strategy. The plan is to present plans to the spring 2018 federal conference for debate. The consultation being carried out this autumn, including a session at the autumn 2017 conference, is part of the process leading up to that.

Many thanks to everyone who has taken part in the work up to this point, including the thousands of members who responded to the consultation paper and survey published before the general election. That survey found widespread support for the approach set out in that earlier paper. This document therefore extends and updates that approach to our future strategy in the light of the general election, looking first at our political strategy and then at the organisational strategy necessary to support it.

# Political strategy

## The political scene

The British political scene in the autumn of 2017 is a complicated and frustrating place. Many people feel the British economy and political world have not treated them and their families fairly - but do not have confidence in the ability of political parties to improve it in a way which will be both fair and effective. The country is divided on the question of whether Britain should remain part of the EU, and on the wider questions about an open attitude to the world which it embodies. A general election in which no one party won an overall majority symbolised this division, uncertainty and confusion.

The Liberal Democrat approach to Britain's future is clear, deeply rooted in historical conviction and experience. Our goal is a society in which everyone has the opportunity to live their own lives as they choose and to be accepted for who they are; where freedom and diversity are valued over conformity. Politics and government can play an important role in helping achieve this, but this will only really exist when people are able to take and use power not only over political decisions but also over everything which affects their lives and their communities.

As a result, we believe that people have better lives, and the world works better for everyone, when we approach challenges with an open, inclusive and tolerant mind, based on the worth of every individual, their needs and their wishes. Whatever short-term attractions they may appear to offer, barriers, division and distrust are the wrong answer.

That is why Britain is best off in the European Union and should continue to have as close a relationship with it as possible. It is also why strong public services and care for those who need it are an important part of British society. But more than that, our society needs to change so that, wherever they live and whoever they are, everyone has a fair chance at a good job and they and those close to them can have a good life.

The current leadership of the Conservative party has made clear its wish to make Britain less open to the world, pursuing a form of Brexit which will cause serious harm to us. The current Labour leader does the same, also offering an unsatisfying form of hope, combined with a manifesto for delivering it which literally does not add up. The extent to which Conservative and Labour MPs support the approaches of their current respective leaders is unclear. The Scottish Nationalist Party, Plaid Cymru and the Greens share some aspects of our own view of the world, but in other ways are shockingly restrictive. Yet beyond their leaders, all these parties have some members and voters who to a greater or lesser extent have a liberal outlook.

## The Liberal Democrat opportunity

This landscape poses opportunities but also challenging questions for the Liberal Democrats. Some experts, including many in the party, point towards a shift in political debate from the traditional 'right versus left' axis, to an 'open versus closed' view (with the Lib Dems strongly in the 'open' camp).

Academic research indicates that a core of perhaps 20-25% of the British public share a strong commitment to this liberal approach, with a much larger number sharing some aspects of it. This is around three times the party's share of the vote at the last two general elections (but roughly in line with our vote share in the first three general elections of this century).

That group of voters makes for an obvious target for the party, but what level of success could we realistically expect to achieve from focussing on them? Attracting a much larger core of supporters who share our values could provide the long-term foundations for greater success, but pitching so clearly for this group of voters may put off people who currently vote for us for other reasons, including local factors.

Moreover, appealing to people based on the values they share with us has been a relatively small part of our electoral pitches in the past. Our usual emphasis on specific headline policies, the local hard work of candidates and tactical voting messages has, at its best, been very powerful. Yet it has also often left little room for electoral appeal based on shared values.

**Q1. *To what extent should the party concentrate its strategy and messaging rigorously on this group of voters as the building block for greater long-term success? If we do concentrate on them, how do we convert people who share key values with us into people who vote for us?***

The most high-profile concrete example of this split between open and closed views is in the EU. The Liberal Democrats are the only UK-wide political party with an unambiguous and principled past and current commitment to Britain's positive relationship with the EU. This is by far the biggest current political issue. Its impact on most people's daily lives is currently small, though campaigners on both sides believe this will change significantly over coming years – and for EU citizens living in the UK, that future already feels very close.

If we did this, what proportion of the 48% who voted Remain could we realistically expect to come to support us, and what would be the effect on some of our current voters who do not agree with us on this issue, especially in specific parliamentary seats?

**Q2. *To what extent should the Liberal Democrats prioritise a strong pro-European message – and how do we make it more successful at appealing to Remain voters?***

Many voters for other parties, and some of their leading figures, share a very broadly liberal outlook, especially for an 'open' society and about Britain's place in Europe, if not some aspects of our policy. To secure our wider objectives, building broad coalitions could be a vital step. But the more we

emphasise how we agree with those in other parties, the greater the risk that voters come away confused about what we stand for or thinking that supporting other parties is an effective way to deliver on our beliefs.

***Q3. What should our attitude be towards working with pro-Europeans and liberals who are not members of the Liberal Democrats?***

Crucial though the Westminster Parliament is to decisions on Brexit, there is much more to politics than just Westminster. Not only are there many other sources of elected political power, but the power to improve people's lives and strengthen our communities can also be wielded outside of elected office too. A dual approach covering both avenues to securing change was at the heart of Community Politics.

It can both mobilise wider forces in favour of our beliefs and help turn our beliefs into concrete action, but for a party that is often out-gunned at election time, it can risk being a distraction from the basics of winning elections.

***Q4. How much should we focus on securing broader liberal and democratic change in society outside of an immediate focus on winning elections?***

# Organisational strategy

## Our objectives

The questions addressed in the political strategy point towards a major change in how British politics operates. For them to be more than theoretical debating points, we need to

create a political movement of sufficient size, resilience and skill to be able to secure major change.

It is a challenging goal that can be achieved if all parts of the party work together, volunteers and staff, 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, everyone 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 seats;
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.

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.

***Q5. Would you change any of these top three objectives for the organisational strategy, and if so how?***

## How do we achieve our objectives?

It would be very easy to come up with a long wish list of good ideas for improving the party. A meaningful strategy, however, makes choices about what really needs prioritisation. We've therefore identified five mutually supporting key tasks needed to deliver on the aspirations of the political strategy:

1. **Increasing our capacity**, especially through more members, more training and more fundraising, including supporting more members in becoming local leaders with their own distinctive voices.
  2. **Running issue-led campaigns** which showcase what we believe, helping to create a larger 'core vote' of people who regularly support us because they share our values and also providing every member with the chance to contribute to campaigns which change the country.
  3. **Giving all members the right tools and skills**, easy to use and with a minimum of administrative and financial barriers to getting started.
  4. **Improving our diversity**, to unlock new skills, knowledge and perspectives for us as well as demonstrating to voters that we live our values.
  5. **Simplifying our organisation**, giving all parts of the party more flexibility to achieve the right structures for themselves and embracing more online organisation.
- Q6. *Are these the right priorities, and what are the best ways of achieving them?***

## Systemic biases in the political system

One reason previous party strategies have not led us to greater success is a set of systemic factors which tilt the political playing field against us and hold us back from success:

- The continued widespread use of first past the post which favours parties with geographically concentrated bases of support or with high levels of national support
- The financing of politics, which benefits those with big business or trade union supporters
- The media, with a strong showing for both Labour and, especially, the Conservatives amongst the owners of media outlets

***Q7. Are there any other systemic factors holding back the party which you would add to this list?***

## Addressing the systemic biases

### *Electoral reform*

Our past efforts to get the electoral system in Westminster changed have not been successful, either after the 1997 election or the 2010 election. However, we have had more success at building coalitions to change the electoral system at other levels – from local councils in Scotland using STV through to the slightly improbable sight of preferential voting being used in by-elections for the hereditary peers in the House of Lords.

**Q8. *How can we build a successful campaign coalition to secure changes to our electoral system and which elections should that campaign prioritise for change?***

### *Fundraising*

Our fundraising efforts have been relatively successful: we often outstrip the Labour party in donations from private individuals. But both Labour and the Conservatives continue to have large financial advantages over us thanks to support from the very rich and trade unions.

**Q9. *How do we build a fundraising base which gives us a chance of matching the other parties on a level-playing field? Should the party be looking to breaking into the monopoly of political trade union funding for Labour, and if so how?***

## *The media*

It is often a badge of pride for Liberal Democrats not to be the favoured party of media proprietors. Consistent outright support from a national newspaper for the party (or previously for the Alliance or the Liberal Party before that) has been rare although it is frequently seen for other parties. When it has occurred, it has been from titles with smaller rather than larger circulations.

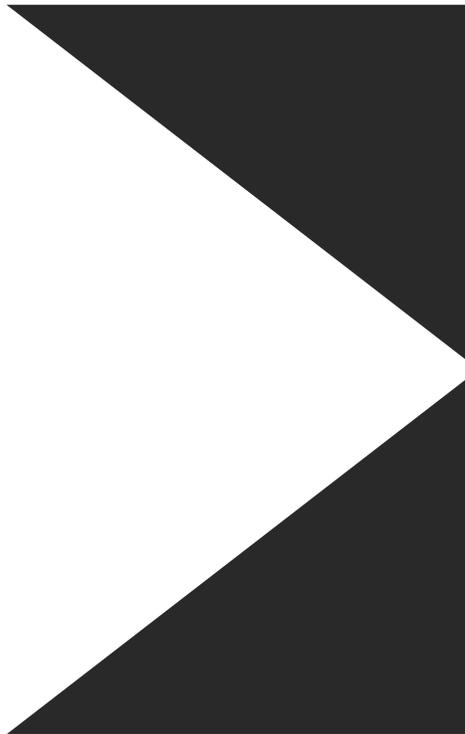
***Q10. How can the party secure better coverage from newspapers owned by proprietors traditionally hostile to the party – or should the party not try? How can the party sideline the traditional importance of media by creating our own direct audiences, especially through digital channels?***

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