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**What Liberal  
Democrats Believe**

**Policy Paper 142**

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## **What Liberal Democrats Believe: Principles and values**

The Liberal Democrats exist to build and safeguard a fair, free and open society, in which we seek to balance the fundamental values of liberty, equality and community, and in which no one shall be enslaved by poverty, ignorance or conformity.'

These words, from the preamble to the Liberal Democrat party constitution, are written on every party member's membership card. They are the best short description of the party's principles and values – its philosophy. But clearly, they need expanding and explaining, particularly given that so much in Britain and the world has changed so radically in recent years.

This document is our attempt to help party members express what the Liberal Democrats stand for. It is not a detailed treatise; the party, and individual party members, have published many longer papers in the past, including in recent years, and we encourage you to read and discuss them. But we hope that party members will see their beliefs and passions reflected in this paper, and that it will help clarify the Liberal Democrat approach that underpins our detailed policy proposals.

We believe the party's core values can be described as liberty, equality, democracy, community, internationalism and environmentalism.

### **Liberty**

Liberal Democrats trust individuals to make their own decisions about how they live their lives, as long as they do not cause harm to others; no one else has the right to do this for them. We are optimistic about what individuals can achieve when not held back by the barriers of poverty, poor health, lack of access to education or inequality. Our predecessors in the Liberal Party had a proud record, stretching over centuries, of removing barriers to freedom erected on the basis of religion, belief, gender,

sexuality or disability, and we will always defend the legal framework of human rights and civil liberties that protect individual freedoms.

An open, diverse and tolerant society is a good society. Being liberal necessitates being open-minded, and understanding that there will always be a range of different views on most issues. We embrace freedom of thought and speech, and argue for stronger protection against those who abuse free speech, use it to promote division and hatred, or spread falsehoods and 'fake news'.

## **Equality**

Liberty goes hand in hand with equality, since 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. It is a savage indictment of the UK today that here, in one of the richest countries in the world, in 2019–20 over four million children – almost a third of all children – lived in poverty.

Achieving equality requires an active state, where government provides decent public services and an adequate welfare safety net for those in need. The great reforming Liberal governments of the early twentieth century laid the foundations of the modern welfare state, the Liberal William Beveridge created its essential framework and in the 1980s the Social Democratic Party was founded on the basis of a belief in social justice.

Liberal Democrats care passionately in particular about equal opportunities in 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. Our approach to education at all life stages is exemplified through our proposals for a skills wallet, through which individuals can access education and training throughout their lives, and our commitment to free school meals. Our support for shared parental

leave legislation when in government, and for free child care, similarly aim to improve life chances for children.

Yet we need to go beyond this, and tackle inequalities in wealth and income and power at their roots. Britain is one of the most unequal countries in the Western world, the gaps between wealthy and poor individuals, and wealthy and poor communities and regions, are widening, and those with the greatest wealth continue to exercise the greatest influence on the direction of the country. Our policies for a universal basic income and a fair tax system, among others, aim to give everyone an equal chance to live their lives as they wish.

The other dimension of the Liberal Democrat commitment to 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 as Liberal Democrats we still pursue this quest for equality today – for example through legislating, during the coalition, for same-sex marriage, in aiming to close gender and ethnic minority pay gaps and in opposing discrimination wherever it occurs.

## **Democracy**

Democracy is viscerally a core value of Liberal Democrats; it provides the means through which individuals exercise control over the institutions that shape their lives. But democracy in Britain is under threat. The first-past-the-post electoral system leads to gross distortions in representation and means that large numbers of voters feel unrepresented in Westminster and in local government; this is why we campaign for proportional representation for all elections.

But for us democracy means more than just a mechanism for counting votes. It means a system in which every citizen is empowered to make their voice heard. 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 checks and balances, so that those in power cannot abuse their positions for personal gain or political advantage. It means a plurality of views, where no individual or organisation is deterred from speaking truth to power.

We are outraged by the current government's assault on the basic norms of democracy, by their lies, corruption and cronyism, by their efforts to stamp on any form of dissent and by their insidious undermining of the rule of law. They have abandoned all the political values that people used to think characterised the governance of Britain: decency, integrity, transparency, standards in public life. They are turning the UK into an illiberal and authoritarian state in which one party will be in power forever. We will oppose them at every opportunity.

## **Community**

Individuals do not exist in isolation; we are all members of an incredibly rich weave 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 the enjoyment of each other's company; they are the main way through which people express their identity. We will always strive to empower diverse communities and individuals' rights to join or to leave them.

The importance of communities has been underlined during the pandemic, as millions of citizens have supported not only their family, friends and neighbours but strangers and key workers, with food, transport and other means. Government should bolster this network of caring responsibilities, by providing support for local groups and individual carers.

Communities allow for true democracy in enabling individuals to express their needs and take decisions, but to function effectively, they need to be able to exercise real political and economic power. We believe that

government should encourage the development of thriving communities – decentralising power, for example through the establishment of tenants’ management of social housing, community energy cooperatives, local remote working hubs, mutual structures at work, employee participation or trade unions.

We aim to disperse power as widely as possible throughout society. This implies decentralising power to local government and to the nations and regions of the UK. The UK’s departure from the EU has destabilised even further the uncomfortable, and sometimes adversarial, relationships between the different governments within the UK. Liberal Democrats are committed to a federal UK in which power and resources are shared fairly and genuinely between its component nations, while retaining the strong strategic advantages of the Union, and the unique powers of local government.

## **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. Britain will be at its best in a fairer and more equal, tolerant and connected world. We strive to offer everyone in Britain equal opportunities to access the experiences and personal rewards that global connectivity brings.

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, tackling the climate and nature emergencies, standing up to corporate power and spreading prosperity around the world. There is no healthy future for our country if we do not work with others to tackle these problems. This includes establishing a framework for international trade which respects high social and environmental standards. It includes offering support for the most vulnerable through restoring the UK’s development assistance programme; it was Liberal Democrats in coalition



who established the commitment to meet the UN target of 0.7 per cent of GNI in aid.

And this is why we have always supported, and will continue to champion, the European project; 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 SDP in the Alliance of the 1980s. Now, after Brexit, we argue for developing much closer relations with the UK's former partners in the EU, to the benefit of British citizens and British companies; and we will work to create the conditions through which the UK is able to join the EU once again.

## **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. The accelerating climate and nature emergencies 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. The Liberal Party was the first of Britain's major parties to call for urgent action to protect the environment.

We need to act at home and internationally to promote environmentally sustainable means of production and consumption – as did Liberal Democrats in coalition, in setting ambitious climate targets, establishing the world's first Green Investment Bank, supporting the growth of renewable energy and promoting decentralised and community energy. Many Liberal Democrat-run local councils have pioneered local sustainability solutions. But this is not just about economics: protecting the beauty of the natural world is a good in itself, and societies that live in harmony with nature, protect biodiversity and respect animal welfare, are healthier and happier than those that do not. We need a better way to judge the progress and well-being of society than mere growth in GDP.

## **But are we different?**

We recognise that change is required to face the new challenges of our world. In meeting these challenges we aim to be ground-breaking and radical, but rational.

Unlike other parties, Liberal Democrats are not obsessed with the divisions between the public and private sectors. We believe in an activist state, taking action to tackle major challenges such as inequality, poverty and the climate emergency, and in the importance of public services and regulation, but we also value the motivation and efficiencies that market forces can deliver. And we recognise the value of alternative models, such as cooperatives and social enterprises. No system is ever perfect; it is through the energy and determination of the people that work in these activities that decent outcomes can be delivered for individuals and their communities.

Unlike other parties, we do not pretend that we have all the answers. What we want to do is create structures that empower individuals to work out their own answers. Ever since the Brexit referendum of 2016, too many politicians have fanned the flames of division and intolerance as their short-cut to power. This is deeply damaging, not only to the individuals who suffer directly from it but to the country as a whole, holding everyone back from realising the aims of prosperity and well-being.

## **A liberal society**

So what does the Liberal Democrat approach mean for people who live in Britain?

In a liberal society, everyone is free to pursue their dreams, to make the most of their talents and to live their lives as they wish. Everyone has enjoyed high-quality education at school and has access to education and training throughout their lives. People can apply for worthwhile jobs or, if they prefer, work for themselves. They know they are supported by health

and social care and welfare benefits in case of need, and they can rent or buy decent housing in safe neighbourhoods to live in.

People know who takes decisions on their behalf at a local level, whether this is in local government or local public services, and they know how to make their views heard through a multiplicity of representative organisations. If something goes wrong, whether in the companies they work for or buy from, or in their rights under law, there are means of putting things right, of access to justice, which every individual can use fairly whatever their background, education, income or wealth.

The country is a world leader in tackling the climate and nature emergencies, reducing emissions of greenhouse gases and pollutants and improving the efficiency of energy and resource use. The use of fossil fuels for power, heat and transport is coming to an end, walking and cycling are encouraged and clean public transport is available. The countryside is coming back to life with the spread of forests and the recovery of wildlife; healthy and affordable food is produced in increasingly low-impact ways.

Britain is once more a member of the EU, working with its European neighbours to tackle the major challenges of the century. Britain's aid programme is one of the largest in the world, relative to its wealth, addressing global poverty and the climate and nature emergencies.

Democracy is thriving. Local councils at all levels represent their citizens and values and listen to their views. Proportional representation, together with an effective system of constraints on those elected, ensure that no party exercises a monopoly of power at any level, local or national. Of course there are major disagreements between parties, but they are resolved through elections and collaboration, and respect for one another's views, not through the winner-takes-all contempt for opposition that characterises our current system.

A different country, a different world, is possible.

## **What Liberal Democrats Believe: Principles and values**

### **Policy Paper 142**

This paper has been approved for debate by the Federal Conference by the Federal Policy Committee under the terms of Article 7.4 of the Federal Constitution.

Within the policy-making procedure of the Liberal Democrats, the Federal Party determines the policy of the Party in those areas which might reasonably be expected to fall within the remit of the federal institutions in the context of a federal United Kingdom.

The Party in England, the Scottish Liberal Democrats, the Welsh Liberal Democrats and the Northern Ireland Local Party determine the policy of the Party on all other issues, except that any or all of them may confer this power upon the Federal Party in any specified area or areas.

The Party in England has chosen to pass up policy-making to the Federal level. If approved by Conference, this paper will therefore form the policy of the Federal Party on federal issues and the Party in England on English issues. In appropriate policy areas, Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland party policy would take precedence.

Further copies of this paper can be found online at [www.libdems.org.uk/policy\\_papers](http://www.libdems.org.uk/policy_papers)

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