

THINK PIECE
#93

The place for Radical Liberalism in the 21st century

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ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

This paper was written by two Liberal Democrats with close links to Compass, to stimulate discussion within the Lib Dems about formulating the party's policy platform in a way that is both true to the party's radical roots and could make it part of any future Progressive Alliance.

This paper is aimed at offering policy input to the review of Party Strategy currently being undertaken by the Federal Board. It makes the case for the party to embrace and advance radical liberalism in today's political context. It is deliberately short in order to make its point, even at risk of cutting a few corners. The authors are delighted to make the paper available to Compass members and supporters in the hope that readers inside the Lib Dems and in other progressive parties and none see the radical side to Party that is essential to the electoral and political future of progressive politics.

Compass is keen to keep exploring these key issues and would welcome any comments or ideas about how.

Compass **Think Pieces** are shorter, sharper and more immediate responses to key issues. The ideas and the thoughts are always those of the author, not Compass. They can cover any topic that helps us understand better what a good society should or could look like and how we might get there. We welcome suggestions for future publications, especially from women and any groups or people in society who are under-represented in the field of political thought and action.

Please contact: frances@compassonline.org.uk in the first instance.

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Compass is a home for those who want to build and be a part of a Good Society; one where equality, sustainability and democracy are not mere aspirations, but a living reality.

We are founded on the belief that no single issue, organisation or political party can make a Good Society a reality by themselves so we have to work together to make it happen. Compass is a place where people come together to create the visions, alliances and actions to be the change we wish to see in the world.

Purpose

There are enough discussion papers sculling around Liberal Democrat circles, so if there's to be another one, it has to serve a clear purpose. The aim behind this paper is twofold:

- To define what today's incarnation of radical liberalism means in terms of policies and its unique place in today's political context;
- To package those policies so they give a sense of purpose and identity to what being a Liberal Democrat means, but in a way that makes it clear where they leave scope for working together with other parties, both before the next general election and afterwards, to help ensure progressives dominate 21st century UK politics the way the Conservatives managed in the 20th.

In other words, we need to make it easier for the public (including those either casually interested in politics or only interested at election times) to understand what the Lib Dems stand for; we need to do so in a way that the public and other progressives can get the message that voting Lib Dem will lead to lasting political, social and economic change; and we need to be clear that Lib Dems are willing to work with others to help achieve a more pluralistic, cohesive and collaborative society.

Basic parameters

UK liberalism has a great tradition as a creative and radical force, often best known through leading reformist figures such as Gladstone, Hobhouse, Lloyd George, Keynes, Beveridge (a liberal whose ideas were implemented by a Labour government) and Grimond. More recently, positions such as Kennedy's opposition to the Iraq war and Cable's advocacy of wealth taxes can be seen as a continuation of the party's radical core. But the delicate balancing act and policy of equidistance that characterised the Clegg years meant the party appeared to lack clarity about its liberalism (a dangerous position for a party based around values, rather than clearly defined collective interests), and while understandable in a practical context, the 2010-15 coalition has toxified the Lib Dem

brand with many former voters. Various policies, such as electoral reform and pro-Europeanism, have long been associated with the Lib Dems, but voters sometimes find it hard to identify just what a Lib Dem vote actually means. With the two main parties currently further apart than for at least a generation, the Liberal Democrats risk being squeezed out of the picture by polarised terms of debate. It is vital therefore that Liberal Democrats should set out much more clearly their distinctness and relevance towards better meeting people's needs over the immediate years ahead, and why they are an integral part of working for a progressive future.

There are five recognitions that form the parameters in which the search for a definition and packaging of radical liberalism has to fall:

- The Conservatives are in government, which means progressive parties will inevitably be closer to each other by dint of shared opposition, and the next election is likely to be more of a 'get the Tories out' election than at any time since 1997. In addition, intellectual common ground between Liberal Democrats and Conservatives was exhausted during the 2010-15 coalition.
- Most Lib Dem target seats are Conservative-facing, where to succeed we need to strike a balance between winning favour from some soft Conservatives and generally doing a lot better at 'squeezing' anti-Conservative voters (which we did successfully in 1997). As Pack and Howarth found in their 2015 'The 20% Strategy: Building a core vote for the Liberal Democrats', three fifths of voters with a broadly liberal outlook hold views on the economic centre-left.¹ This speaks to us rebuilding a public perception as an alternative centre-left party to Labour (as occurred under the leaderships of Kennedy and Campbell) rather than a centre ground party that is equidistant from the two main parties (and which risks us being aggressively squeezed by both). We can say we're sounder on economics than Labour, we can say we're a more evidence-based

alternative to Jeremy Corbyn, we can say we're the more pragmatic choice for those who want a prosperous and compassionate society, but we need to make clear that we are of the progressive centre-left and not the safe and soggy centre. When the party formally abandoned a position of equidistance in 1995, the Federal Executive adopted a statement which included the declaration: 'No quarter for the Tories. No let-up on Labour. Liberal Democrats will continue to campaign and win for the principles and policies that we believe in.'² While the statement was appropriate for the political context of its era, we believe such public positioning offers a useful example for today about how the party might again go about maintaining its distinctiveness while also indicating that it operates on the centre-left.

- A key long-term goal has to be a proportional voting system for the House of Commons. Only then can we truly pursue liberalism unencumbered by electoral tactics and ensure liberal voters can finally punch their weight. The Conservatives are not going to deliver PR: the 2017 Conservative manifesto committed the party to ensuring first-past-the-post was introduced for all police and mayoral elections in England, and many Conservatives would prefer Labour to have an overall majority so it doesn't introduce PR than see it break open British politics permanently. By contrast, the Greens, the SNP and Plaid Cymru all support proportional representation, while all meaningful electoral reform achieved over recent generations has occurred with either the support of or through the Labour Party.³ Furthermore, there is a growing commitment to PR among senior Labour politicians and activists from across the Labour factions that appears to be a genuine conviction, rather than simply an opposition tactic that will be abandoned the moment they are in government.⁴ Leading advocates for PR in Labour range from Corbyn loyalists such as John McDonnell and Cat Smith,

through the various shades of Labour opinion such as Clive Lewis, Stephen Kinnock, Jonathan Reynolds and Jon Ashworth, to 'Blairites' like Chuka Umunna and Ben Bradshaw. In addition, an increasing number in Labour recognise that forging a more equal society requires equal votes (that democratic and economic equality are entwined).

- If we believe in PR, we have to accept that, under PR, there is unlikely ever to be a single-party majority government, and therefore parties will have to work together. While we have to be awake to the potential of frightening away voters with the prospect of cooperating with one party or another, we have more to gain for liberal voters by establishing the principle of cooperation in the public's mind and delivering them a louder voice through PR.
- Centristism and equidistance doesn't work for minor liberal parties. It leaves them open to being aggressively squeezed. As the Lib Dem blogger and political science PhD student Nick Barlow explained in 2015, where the main parties of the left and right are not close together and cannot form governments with each other, liberal parties must 'pick a side' between left or right and work within it.⁵ This is what almost all other liberal parties do on the national stage.

Values and vision of radical liberalism

Liberalism is an emancipatory ideology. Radical social liberals believe we must prioritise sharing power more equally and empowering those who are least empowered. We have allowed our opponents to appropriate this spirit, for instance when Vote Leave effectively used the slogan 'take back control'. Furthermore, some opponents have been able to frame liberals as elitist.

While we respect and appreciate those who generate wealth, we are far from elitist, and seek the devolution of power and wealth, believing that one is not possible without the other. Both will ultimately boost liberty and prosperity. Our desire for redistribution and

concern for those who have the least provides a great deal of common ground with other progressives.

But what marks liberals as different from some other progressives is that we are based far less on advancing clearly defined group interests (such as class or a national identity) and more on the empowerment of individuals. We are led by a philosophy, not class interest. We envisage a compassionate society, in which everyone has a respected place, as a context in which all individuals are given a chance to develop themselves and shine in whatever way is appropriate for them and helpful to society. We are less communitarian than Labour and other parties because of the extent of our belief in the rights and opportunity of the individual, and in all spheres we seek to set individual freedom first (albeit mindful that individual freedom stops at the point where it impinges on the freedom of others). We see a key role for an active and enabling state but are suspicious of all concentrations of power, whether public or private, hence our instinctive commitment to civil liberties, human rights and social justice.

Both the shared striving with others for a more compassionate and equal society, and our philosophical commitment to celebrating the individual need emphasising, so we are clearly seen to be of the centre-left, but with our own distinct outlook and identity. One without the other will not take us very far.

Economic issues are often the biggest drivers of voter behaviour, so it is important for Lib Dems to have a distinct economic policy that follows from our basic principles. We must make sure we are not defined by the 2010-15 coalition with the Conservatives, which was not an end in itself but a measure to provide political stability in an uncertain time. The route to this lies in playing our part in discrediting the post-1979 'neoliberal consensus' (neoliberalism is neither liberal nor new – it centralizes wealth and power into the hands of those who are already rich and powerful through monopoly capitalism, under regulated market, privatization, tax cuts and austerity), and making the case for a new economics that involves revising elements of Keynesianism. We reject market fundamentalism as well as remote and

overbearing government. We wish to encourage bottom-up forms of enterprise that are run on liberal and cooperative principles.

But radical liberalism needs to go further, for example challenging the narrow concept of growth that lies at the heart of both neoliberalism and Keynesian social democracy (growth that focuses almost entirely on naked productivity, to the exclusion of quality of life, long term security and well-being). Even 50 years after the 'limits to growth' debate, advocating an end to growth may still be a step too far at this stage. But any growth that we do accept must be within defined sustainable limits so we are quite clearly tackling the contributory factors to environmental degradation and wealth inequality, not just trying to fight the symptoms.

Framing of policies

The way we frame our policies and campaign messages has to meet three criteria: encapsulate radical liberalism, generate a sense of what the Liberal Democrats stand for that the general public can assimilate, and allow scope for the formation of shared agendas, whether or not these shared agendas ultimately find form through formal pre-election pacts and post-election cooperation in government, or merely by encouraging progressive voters to vote Lib Dem where it makes sense to do so.

With this in mind, the party could formulate the following two-pronged vision:

- A society that respects environment, equality and internationalism.
- An economic model that puts sustainability, innovation and human dignity at its core.

In terms of specific policies, this could mean:

Environment – a commitment to respecting all the UK's current environmental obligations (including those currently laid down through EU processes), and working towards future models of development that respect critical loads and limits, and access to environmental justice. We must commit to ensuring the costs of transitioning to a low-carbon economy are shared in a progressive manner.

Equality – enacting measures to guarantee equality of recognition for all people regardless of ability, background or how they wish to define themselves, equality of value of votes (effectively PR in all elections), equality of voice in society and a recognition that equality of opportunity is a means to greater equality of outcome.

Internationalism – a recognition that today’s world is interdependent and therefore we have to cooperate with others and accept our responsibilities as an affluent member of the developed world, while at the same time recognising that the movement of people can sometimes happen at a pace that is not conducive to the peaceful and seamless evolution of national and local society. To this end we recognise an increased role for the state to manage population change better (by investing in infrastructure, housing and public services) and share the proceeds of globalisation (for instance through investment in de-industrialised areas). In addition, we want to work with others to ensure peace and disarmament.

Economics – a plan to ensure the UK’s economic model relies on investing in people and ideas, not exploiting workers or the planet. This must include a commitment to reform capitalism. Measures to advance socially responsible capitalism should include promoting greater corporate social responsibility, tackling abuses and concentrations of corporate power, promoting mutualism and workplace democracy, and redistributing wealth.

Markets – a recognition that there is a need for a benign state but that the state can’t do everything better than the private sector; therefore the state must be defined as an enabler of social services, whether it provides such services itself or not. Together with this definition must be a recognition of where markets can work without the need for much state intervention to ensure compliance with regulation and prevent monopolies, and where they do not work (in particular in the provision of health and education services). Where markets do not work, public services must be provided by the state (or by other not-for-profit entities such as cooperatives or charities)

in a democratic and publicly accountable way, and driven by public interest, not by profit.

Housing and land – the state must assume a lasting role in ensuring basic standards of dignity in living. This means ensuring that an agreed number of new dwellings are built, with the highest environmental building standards enforced, but also managing a more efficient use of land and existing properties, in order to avoid housing issues being tackled simply by the blunt instrument of ‘predict and provide’. Land as a factor of production is often overlooked, which is why its efficient use and moving much of the tax burden off workers and onto land owners must be taken into consideration in the quest to create an economy that is stronger and structurally fairer. (The ownership and use of land is a traditionally liberal preoccupation.)

Civil liberties – while the very difficult role of police, security and anti-terrorism services is appreciated and respected, a state based on surveillance of individuals, along with other threats to civil rights, presents the biggest long-term threat to liberty. The defence of civil liberties and human rights must therefore be at the heart of any progressive government, which will mean greater democratic oversight for surveillance functions.

Education – ensuring policy is led by evidence, and not the ideologies of market fundamentalism, nor of centralisation where the state ‘knows best’. This will include reverting Ofsted to its originally intended role of ensuring minimum standards that in turn guarantee equality of opportunity rather than it being an overbearing adjudicator of relativity; allowing schools to opt out of multi-academy trusts and revert to local and local authority oversight if they (i.e. local people) wish to; boosting the autonomy and status of teachers; and upholding the comprehensive principle.

Political reform – providing the constitutional arrangements and a devolved political system for the 21st century, including voting systems that are sufficiently proportional so that every vote counts, devolving power to sensible levels of local and regional/county control, ensuring greater pluralism of media ownership, improved lobbying transparency, taking big money out of politics, ensuring the

growth of social media does not compromise democratic accountability, and electing the House of Lords.

Presumption of common sense – a good faith defence that sends a signal to insurers and the judicial system that anyone who has acted on the basis of common sense and with reasonable regard for risks should be deemed free from prosecution. This should be advanced in a programme of penal reforms, including drug decriminalisation, improved mental health and educational services for prisoners, and boosts to legal aid.

When putting these ideas into a manifesto or other policy platform, the overall guiding questions should be: does this policy encapsulate radical liberalism, does it make the Lib Dems distinctive, and does it leave scope for pre-and/or post-electoral cooperation? In some cases it will do more of one than the others, but these should be the criteria by which all policies are ultimately judged.

Progressive alliance

We understand that the term ‘progressive alliance’ or any of its synonyms concerns a number of Liberal Democrats. This is understandable: some Lib Dem MPs are in situ because a critical mass of ‘soft Tories’ have voted for them, and there’s worry that they may not lend us their votes if we are seen to be too close to Labour, the Greens or nationalist parties; others are members in seats that are marginals between the Conservatives and another party, and fear they will be asked to stand aside for a Labour or Green candidate. But the question needs asking whether we have more to gain by being willing to cooperate with other parties of a more similar vision, even if such positioning does not aid all our candidates, than if we play ‘safe’ (if it is safe) and risk spurning the chance to grow.

We believe there is more to gain by carefully controlled cooperation with other parties of the left for several reasons, among them:

- It represents the quickest route to electoral reform. We will not achieve PR on our own, so the only way is to put one of the two major parties in the position where they have to deliver it.

Not only are a lot of Labour representatives coming out in favour, but ensuring democratic equality does not go against the values and instincts of Labour, indeed one could argue that some of Labour’s core policies about giving people a voice are fatally undermined without a commitment to equal votes.

- It represents our best chance of securing enough support for an exit from Brexit though a second referendum.
- Liberal voters are broadly left-leaning. Seeking some form of cooperation with any combination of Labour, Greens, SNP, Plaid or even one or more of the Northern Irish parties would not on policy grounds alienate many potential Lib Dem voters, indeed it would suit most voters of a liberal outlook.
- Lib Dem members also lean towards the left. Seeking sensible cooperation with Labour, the Greens and nationalist parties would fit with the world view of the majority of Lib Dem members, in fact it could even be seen as redressing the balance from the patience and discipline these Lib Dems had to show during the 2010-15 coalition period.
- Progressive alliances work, both in Britain and abroad. The massive Labour majorities of 1945 and 1997 were both achieved with a lot of cross-party cooperation (some formal, some informal), while the Liberal victory of 1906 also involved cooperation with Labour. In most mainland European countries, progressive alliances have worked both pre- and post-election, and if our aim is to get a proportional voting system, we need to highlight the areas that unite us with certain other parties rather than just the policies that give us our individual identity.
- Labour is not guaranteed an overall majority at the next election. Labour is currently riding high, and clearly

Corbyn has struck a chord with various groups of hitherto excluded voters, but Labour's cherished idea of 'one more heave' to get it into government is optimistic to say the least. Leaving aside the fact that it cannot hold together the fragile coalition of industrial Leavers and youthful Remainers for very long, many people voted Labour in 2017 because the opposition narrative of the whole election – right up to 10pm on polling day – was to stop Theresa May getting too big a majority. Labour was never considered a plausible government, but if it now is, the greater scrutiny may mean many people who voted Labour in 2017 will be less willing to do so next time. Labour may therefore need to depend on Lib Dem and/or SNP support to form a government, and as long as there is a cast-iron guarantee of PR in any Labour government programme, we could afford to take a hit in return for the longer-term prize of making all Lib Dem votes count. In addition, Labour need to take the Lib Dems seriously because they are many Tory facing marginals that Labour still can't win.

- The Liberal Democrats are not guaranteed to survive. Our brand is tainted, and while it might recover in time, under first-past-the-post we are unlikely to win many seats unless we can 'borrow' the votes of parties whose supporters might consider switching to the Lib Dems for tactical reasons. The experience in 2017 of Oxford West and Abingdon, where Layla Moran was elected on a tiny majority thanks to broad support from Labour and Green voters, is but one example of the need for the appropriate level of cooperation, perhaps backed up by reciprocation between parties for elections to different levels of government. Tim Farron's slim victory in Westmorland and Lonsdale and the 2016 Richmond Park by-election are others.

The Liberal Democrats are in a phase of reassessment, still rebuilding after the hammering we took in 2015, and unsure when the next election is going to be or how our stance on Brexit is likely to play out with the electorate. It is therefore a period of reflection and reassessment. We encourage the party to develop its policy platform for the next election along the lines set out in this paper, in order to give us maximum opportunity to establish a place for radical liberalism in the British political landscape, not just after the next election – whenever it comes – but in the long term too.

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1. See page 5 of '[The 20% Strategy: Building a core vote for the Liberal Democrats](#)', Pack and Howarth, January 2016.
 2. A useful historical overview of how the Party last went about abandoning equidistance can be found in an article by the Party's former Director of Strategy and Planning Alan Leaman, '[Ending Equidistance](#)', Journal of Liberal History, 19, Summer 1998, pp. 3-10.
 3. Reforms by Labour include introducing proportional representation for European elections in Northern Ireland in 1979, Northern Irish Assembly elections in 1998, Scottish Parliamentary and Welsh Assembly elections in 1999, European elections in Britain in 1999, and London Assembly elections in 2000. Lib Dems achieved proportional representation for local elections in Scotland in 2007 in coalition with Labour at Holyrood. All the Conservatives have ever conceded was a referendum on the Alternative Vote, which is not a proportional voting system and in any event was, as Nick Clegg generously described a 'miserable little compromise'.
 4. '[John McDonnell calls on Labour to back proportional representation](#)', The Independent, 7 May 2016.
 5. Nick Barlow, 'European Liberal Parties Don't Alternate Between Governments of Left and Right Anymore', <http://www.nickbarlow.com/blog/?p=4497>, 5 July 2015.
