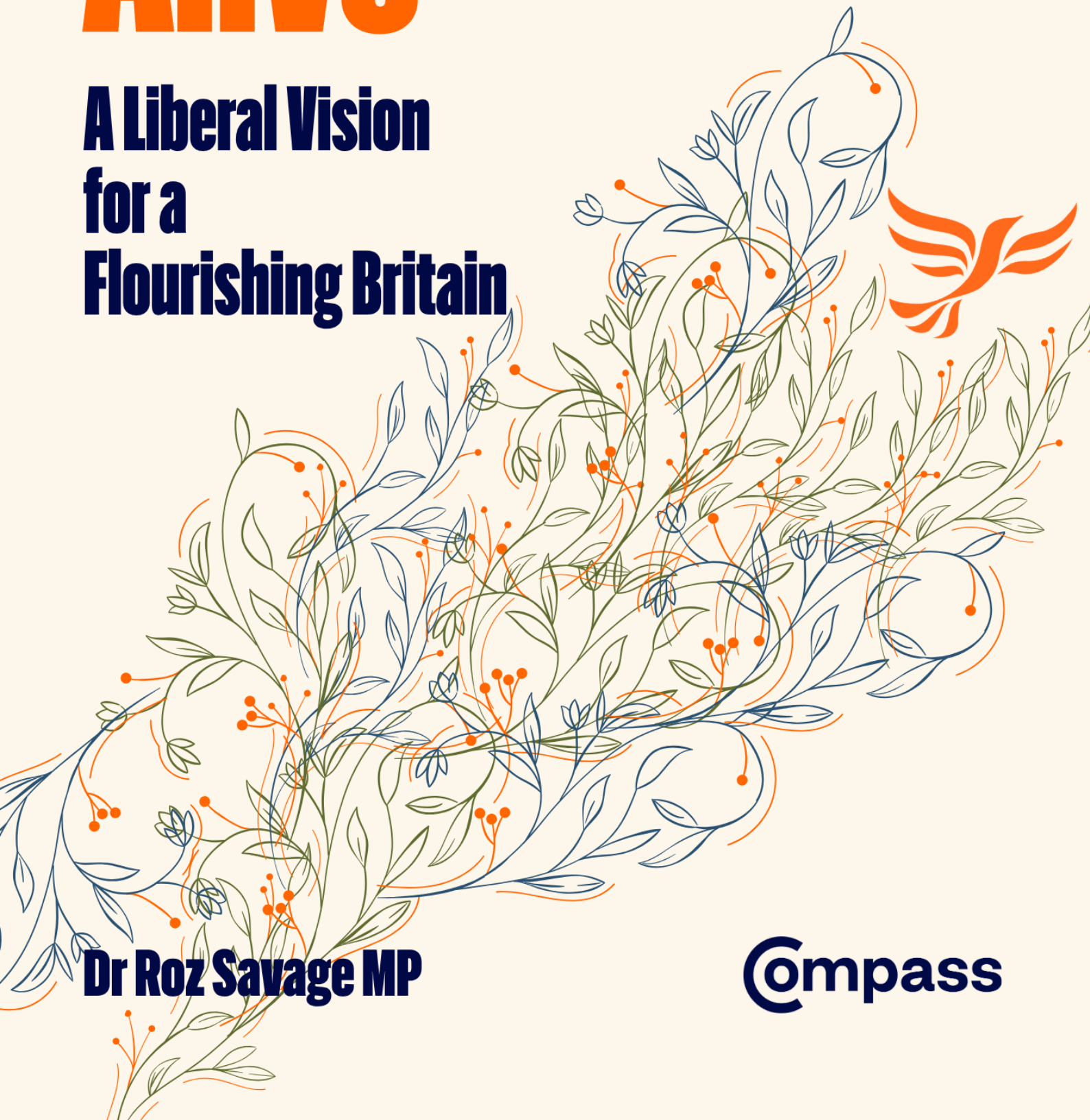


Liberalism **Alive**

**A Liberal Vision
for a
Flourishing Britain**



Dr Roz Savage MP

Compass

About the Author

Dr Roz Savage MBE is the Liberal Democrat MP for South Cotswolds, elected in 2024. Before entering politics, she spent 11 years as a management consultant, working with organisations to understand complex problems and bring about change. She later became the first woman to row solo across three oceans, earning four Guinness World Records and using her voyages to raise awareness of the global environmental crisis. Her years alone at sea shaped her understanding of complexity, resilience, agency and personal responsibility. She also trained as a life coach, reinforcing her belief that people are creative, resourceful and capable when given the right conditions to flourish. As an MP, Roz has put these ideas into practice through Stronger South Cotswolds, a people-powered initiative connecting communities and supporting local action. She is the author of four books, including *The Ocean in a Drop: Navigating from Crisis to Consciousness*.

Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to Neal Lawson for inviting me to write this paper, for encouraging me to think boldly about what Liberalism can offer Britain, and for his thoughtful feedback throughout. My thanks also go to Sam Mandi-Ghomi for his careful editing and proofreading, and to Vince Cable, Chris Bowers, Tom Burke, Neil Stockley, Simon Ruddick, Paul Tyler and Keith Salway, each of whom generously read earlier drafts and helped me sharpen the argument.

The ideas in this paper have also been shaped by the work of countless thinkers including Elinor Ostrom, Donella Meadows and Audrey Tang, whose insights into governance, systems thinking and human capability have profoundly influenced my understanding of power and flourishing.

Above all, I am grateful to the residents, community leaders, councillors and volunteers of South Cotswolds. Through our Flood Summits, Stronger South Cotswolds and countless conversations in village halls, farms, cafés, community centres and businesses, they have shown me what becomes possible when people are trusted with the power to shape the places they call home.

The argument and any errors that remain are, of course, my own.

About Compass

Compass is the pressure group for a Good Society, a world that is much more equal, sustainable and democratic. We mobilise the progressive majority of ideas, parties and movements to help make systemic change happen. Our strategic focus is to understand, build, support, and accelerate new forms of democratic practice

and collaborative action that are taking place in civil society and the economy, and to link those with state reforms and policy. The meeting point of emerging horizontal participation and vertical resource and policy we call 45 Degree Change.

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Introduction: What are Liberal Democrats For?

A few weeks after I was elected, a man in his sixties stopped me at a community event in Cirencester. He told me he had voted Liberal Democrat for the first time in his life. He looked almost embarrassed about it, as though he had done something slightly transgressive. "I just thought," he said, pausing to find the right words, "that you lot actually seemed to mean it."

I've thought about that conversation many times since. He was not talking about a particular policy, but something harder to articulate: a sense that politics could be done differently, that politicians might still be motivated by something more than the pursuit of power, and that there might be another way of organising our country, one that enables people, communities and nature to flourish together.

This essay is an attempt to say what that way might be. It is not a manifesto, but an account of what drew me to Liberalism, what has kept me there, and what I believe it can offer a country in urgent need of a new direction.

Because Britain has lost its way. We are one of the richest countries in the world, yet families who work hard cannot afford decent homes. Young people are locked out of opportunities their parents took for granted. Our rivers have become open sewers while the companies responsible drown in debt. Public services are stretched threadbare. Wealth buys political access while millions feel nobody is listening. We possess astonishing knowledge, technology and productive capacity, yet too many people live with the constant anxiety of rent, bills and care.

The problem is not a lack of resources or ingenuity. It is that too often we have organised them according to the wrong principles.

A country as wealthy as Britain should never ask so many people to settle for so little, while so much wealth is concentrated in so few hands. What disturbs me most is the extent to which we have agreed to call this normal. It isn't. It is a choice, made and made again by people who could have chosen otherwise.

What surprises me is not that people are angry, but that we are not more so. Perhaps that is because we no longer know exactly where to direct that anger. It cannot fairly be aimed at one government or one political generation, because the problem is too deep and too systemic. Inequality and disempowerment have accumulated over the course of several decades under leaders of different parties, some good, some bad, many grappling with circumstances far beyond their control.

No single leader can indefinitely compensate for systems that concentrate power, reward short-termism and leave communities waiting for a hero to solve their problems.

The symptoms are everywhere once you start looking. Britain is one of

the most centralised democracies in the developed world: power, money and attention flow relentlessly towards Westminster and Whitehall, while a neighbourhood cannot improve its own park, or a town shape its own high street, without permission from an authority far away. And a new wave of technology is now arriving that could concentrate power further still, unless we deliberately choose otherwise.

People who feel powerless for long enough do not simply resign themselves to disappointment. Sooner or later, they look for someone to blame. And sooner or later a charismatic leader will appear, offering easy answers, convenient enemies and the promise to smash the whole system rather than mend it.

We can already see that politics taking shape, here and across the democratic world - trading genuine grievances for division, treating truth as negotiable and institutions as obstacles to be swept aside. There is darkness at the end of this road, and that end is perilously near. It is where unaddressed powerlessness inevitably leads if nobody emerges to offer a better way forward.

None of this is fixed by a new slogan, or even a new prime minister. The question is not simply who governs. It is: what is government for? It is about the kind of governance we need to address the existential challenges that now confront our society.

Do we want power dispersed or hoarded?

Do we want a country where wealth buys compliance, or one where every person has a genuine stake in the decisions that shape their life?

Do we want an economy that extracts wealth from communities, or one that helps communities create wealth for themselves?

Do we want a society built on competition alone, or one that also values cooperation, care and mutual responsibility?

Do we want a nation that simply reacts to crises, or one that is resilient enough to prevent them?

Do we want short-term fixes, or long-term stewardship that builds a better future?

Naming the problem is the easy part. The harder and more urgent task is to say what we would do differently, before the future is surrendered by default to those who offer false certainty instead of genuine freedom. This is why Liberalism matters now, more than at any point in my lifetime - not as a comfortable midpoint between left and right, not as nicer technocrats with slightly better policies. Liberalism begins somewhere altogether different.

It asks: how do we create the conditions in which people can flourish?
And once we ask that question honestly, we discover that people do not flourish in isolation. They flourish in thriving communities, sustained by a healthy natural world.

That leads inexorably to another question.

Who is best placed to make that happen?

Everything that follows is my attempt to answer both questions in turn, with the urgency this moment demands: first, why the Liberal tradition is best placed to answer how people flourish, and then, as concretely as I can, what a flourishing Liberal Britain would actually look like - if we have the courage and the patience to build it.

Chapter 1: The Radicalism Hidden in Plain Sight

When Liberal Democrats are asked what we stand for, we tend to start searching for a new answer. Yet a remarkably powerful one already exists in the preamble to our Constitution - the most compelling articulation of a good society that I have ever read, and a large part of the reason why I joined the Lib Dems.

It begins with the proposition that no one should be enslaved by poverty, ignorance or conformity. It affirms liberty, equality and community, and speaks of dispersing power, fostering diversity and safeguarding the planet for future generations. Together, those ideas amount to an extraordinarily radical programme for the twenty-first century.

Liberty without equality easily becomes the liberty of the powerful. Equality without liberty can become coercion. Neither can flourish for long without community: the relationships, institutions and shared sense of responsibility that turn millions of separate individuals into a society.

What first attracted me to Liberalism is that it begins with a particular view of the human being. Years ago, I trained as a life coach. We were taught to regard the person sitting opposite us as creative, resourceful and whole - not a problem to be fixed, but a person capable of growth.

I recognise echoes of that philosophy in Liberalism. People are not merely units of economic output. They are not just taxpayers, consumers, employees or demographic segments. Every person possesses potential that neither the market nor the state can predict in advance. Every classroom contains talents not yet revealed. Every community contains reserves of leadership, imagination, generosity and courage that no central planner could ever anticipate.

A Liberal society should seek to release that potential. That means giving people the security to make choices, the opportunity to develop their abilities, the freedom to pursue their own understanding of a good life, and the power to influence the forces shaping their lives.

The success of a society should therefore be judged not simply on its economic output, but by what it makes possible for its people.

If that is our starting point, the implications are far-reaching. No government, however capable, can possibly possess all the knowledge, creativity and wisdom distributed across millions of lives. A Liberal society therefore disperses power not because decentralisation is fashionable, but because people themselves are its greatest source of intelligence, resilience and innovation.

I recognise not everyone wants to attend a citizen's assembly, run a community energy company or spend their Tuesday night discussing the neighbourhood plan. A Liberal society is about making that active participation truly possible, not compulsory. The aim is not a nation of

permanent meeting goes. Instead, it looks like having choices, recourse and knowing your voice matters when you need it to.

Liberalism's Historic Mission

Power never stays still. It changes form. It migrates between institutions. It adapts to new technologies and changing economic realities. The historic mission of Liberalism has always been to notice when too much of it has accumulated in one place, and to say so before the damage becomes irreversible.

That mission has taken different forms in different generations. Nineteenth-century Liberals confronted aristocratic privilege, rotten boroughs and entrenched hierarchies. The New Liberals recognised that a starving person was not meaningfully free simply because the state left them alone. T. H. Green and L. T. Hobhouse developed a richer conception of freedom, based not merely on freedom from interference but on the real capacity to live and flourish, which Lloyd George translated into social reform. Beveridge understood that chronic insecurity shrinks human possibility: people living in constant fear of unemployment, illness or destitution do not possess the same practical freedom as those who know there is a safety net to catch them when they fall. Keynes recognised that markets do not always deliver socially desirable outcomes. Grimond saw that an increasingly centralised state required a more plural society to challenge it.

Community politics became one of the Liberal Party's most important contributions to British political thought: not merely a way of winning elections, but the conviction that political change should be done *with* people rather than to them.

How Liberalism Lost Its Way

That is a proud tradition. But if Liberalism's historic mission is to challenge concentrations of power and expand people's practical freedom, we also have to ask how well we have lived up to it. Because if Liberalism has so much to offer this moment, we have to address the elephant in the room: why are we as a party struggling for relevance at precisely the moment when so many people feel powerless?

We cannot blame the populists, the media or an electorate that has somehow failed to appreciate our wisdom. We need to take a long hard look at ourselves too.

Somewhere along the way, Liberalism became entangled with something quite different: neoliberalism. The two share a concern for individual freedom, but they have very different understandings of what makes a person genuinely free.

Neoliberalism sees freedom primarily through the market: individuals

making choices, buying and selling, competing and accumulating. Social Liberalism starts with the individual too, but recognises that none of us exists in isolation. Our ability to live freely depends upon the security we possess, the relationships that sustain us, the opportunities open to us and the power we have over the forces shaping our lives.

That also distinguishes social Liberalism, subtly but importantly, from liberal socialism or social democracy. We may often arrive at similar destinations: strong public services, greater equality, economic security and limits on concentrated private power. But we approach them from different directions. Socialism tends to begin with the collective good and ask how individual liberty can be protected within it. Social Liberalism begins with the person and asks what social, economic and political conditions will enable that person to flourish.

Yet in recent decades, Liberals have not always held onto that distinction clearly enough. We defended people's freedom to be themselves, but were less successful at defending their power to shape the economic and political forces governing their lives.

A person can enjoy extensive formal freedoms while feeling profoundly powerless. They can be free to express their identity and opinions, but unable to afford a secure home. Free to vote, but unconvinced that it will make any difference. Free to choose between energy suppliers, but powerless when prices soar. Free to participate in a global economy while watching the industries, shops and institutions that sustained their town disappear.

We should not retreat one inch from defending the rights and dignity of minorities. Liberalism that protects only popular freedoms is not Liberalism at all. But neither should we pretend that economic insecurity, rapid cultural change and the loss of local control do not affect people's sense of freedom, identity and belonging.

Globalisation brought enormous benefits, but those benefits and costs were distributed unevenly. Immigration has enriched Britain economically and culturally, while rapid population change can also put pressure on housing, services and communities, particularly when government fails to invest accordingly. European cooperation brought peace, prosperity and freedoms that I value deeply, but too often decisions felt remote from the people affected by them.

It was not illiberal for people to notice these things. The failure was allowing legitimate questions about power, security, belonging and democratic control to go unanswered until others arrived offering much uglier answers.

Populists are very good at telling people that their power has been taken away. Where they go wrong is telling them who took it: the migrant, the minority, the civil servant, the judge, the international

court, whichever convenient enemy fits the story.

Liberals need a better answer. We should say: yes, too much power has been taken away from you. But look upwards, not sideways.

Look at an economy in which wealth and ownership have become increasingly concentrated. Look at monopolies and corporations more powerful than many governments. Look at decisions sucked upwards from communities into Whitehall. Look at political systems in which millions of votes barely affect the outcome. Look at technology companies acquiring unprecedented power over information, work and public discourse.

The answer is not to find another group with even less power and blame them. It is to redistribute power again.

That requires Liberalism to rediscover its insurgent spirit. We should not be the polite custodians of a system that leaves people feeling powerless. Our historic purpose is to challenge concentrations of power wherever they arise, whether in the state, the market, technology or inherited privilege.

The answer to the failure of neoliberalism and the rise of populism is therefore not less Liberalism. It is a more complete Liberalism: one concerned not only with formal rights, but with practical power; not merely with people's freedom from interference, but with their capacity to shape their lives.

Recovering social Liberalism therefore means more than assembling a better collection of policies. It means remembering that institutions shape behaviour; that economic systems shape relationships; and that the distribution of power helps determine the kind of society, and ultimately the kind of people, we become.

Nor should Liberals imagine that every useful insight belongs to our own tradition. Anthony Crosland and other social democrats understood the importance of distributing opportunity alongside cultural as well as material power. Margaret Thatcher did too. In 1981 she famously said that economics was the method, but the object was to change the heart and soul. On that point at least, she was right. Economics does not merely shape markets; it shapes people.

Tax systems, ownership structures, public services, employment, housing and markets do not merely affect GDP; they influence how people see themselves and one another. Right to Buy, privatisation and wider share ownership were intended to create a society of owners and self-reliant individuals - an extraordinarily ambitious exercise in social engineering through economic incentives.

Where I part company with Thatcher is not over the importance of

economics, but over the destination.

For more than forty years we have organised economic life increasingly around competition, individual consumption and the accumulation of private wealth. Cooperation became something admirable that people did in their spare time rather than something our economic institutions routinely encouraged.

What might happen if we took Thatcher's insight seriously but chose a very different destination? What if economics were the method, but our object was to nurture security, cooperation, ownership, belonging, stewardship and human flourishing?

That is the destination this essay seeks to describe. And it is a direct challenge to everyone who benefits from power remaining exactly where it is.

Chapter 2:

An Economy That

Nurtures Hearts

and Souls

If economics shapes the kind of people we become, then designing an economy is one of the most profound moral choices any society makes.

Markets are immensely useful. Competition can drive innovation, reveal information and challenge complacency. But competition is not a sufficient organising principle for an entire society. A football match needs competition on the pitch, but also agreed rules, trusted officials and acceptance that everybody is playing the same game. In much the same way, a successful market economy needs an envelope of cooperation around the dynamism of competition. The challenge is to design that envelope well: to decide what belongs within the market, what should sit beyond it, and how the two complement one another.

That design process begins with ensuring economic security. People do not become entrepreneurial, generous, civically engaged or forward-looking simply because politicians lecture them about responsibility. A parent worried about eviction or an unexpected bill is unlikely to have the bandwidth to raise their sights higher.

A Liberal economy should therefore guarantee a strong foundation: excellent healthcare and education, decent social care, affordable housing and an adequate minimum income beneath which nobody is allowed to fall. Universal public services are not the enemy of liberty; they are part of its infrastructure, giving people the confidence to change jobs, retrain or start businesses.

Security is not the reward for a flourishing society. It is one of the conditions that makes flourishing possible.

The next step is to broaden ownership: employee-owned businesses, mutuals, cooperatives, community land trusts and community energy. Businesses in which the people creating the value also have a meaningful stake in it. None is a magic answer. Cooperatives can be badly governed. Employee-owned firms still need capital and sometimes must make painful decisions.

But the answer to imperfect distributed ownership is not to surrender to concentrated ownership. It is to build better institutions: through company law, finance, procurement and taxation; through stronger rights for employees to buy businesses when owners sell; through meaningful rights for community groups to acquire assets of local importance.

Ownership changes more than balance sheets; it changes relationships. The economic relationship begins to shift from, *"I work for them"* towards, *"I have a stake in this."* And from, *"Decisions about my community are made elsewhere,"* towards, *"We have a real stake in the place we call home"*.

Public procurement can reinforce the same shift. A hospital buying

food is not merely purchasing calories. A council commissioning social care is not merely purchasing hours of labour. Those choices can extract wealth from a place, or help circulate it locally as pioneered in Preston. Public institutions should routinely ask: can our spending simultaneously deliver a good service, strengthen local businesses and increase resilience?

Imagine schools serving more food from regional farms, or councils helping small businesses collaborate to compete for larger contracts. Money already being spent can accomplish more than one thing at once. That is not protectionism, it is intelligent stewardship.

Instead of communities forever asking, *"Who will invest in us?"*, they can increasingly ask, *"What assets, skills and resources do we already have, and what can we build with them?"*

Security becomes confidence. Ownership becomes responsibility. Procurement becomes a way of strengthening relationships as well as delivering services. Step by step, the economy ceases to be merely a mechanism for allocating resources and becomes a means of cultivating stronger communities.

A Liberal economy should therefore be judged not only by how efficiently it creates wealth, but by the kinds of relationships it encourages, the opportunities it opens, and the people it helps us become.

Private Sufficiency, Public Luxury

For decades we have quietly equated prosperity with rising private consumption. Perhaps we have been measuring the wrong thing.

There are two ways to feel richer. One is to own more. The other is to live in a place where more wonderful things are available to everyone: beautiful parks, libraries open into the evening, reliable and affordable public transport, clean rivers, thriving high streets and public spaces where neighbours can connect with one another. That is the promise of private sufficiency and public luxury.

We do not all need enormous private gardens if every child can walk to a beautiful park. We do not all need several cars if public transport is genuinely reliable. We do not all need to purchase individually what we could enjoy together.

This is also an environmental proposition. A society can live better without endlessly multiplying private consumption if it invests instead in shared abundance.

A flourishing society should feel generous rather than grasping. Wealth should be experienced not only through what we own, but through the

quality of the world we share.

Chapter 3:

Government for a

Complex Country

Changing economics is not enough. We also need to rethink government itself.

We have already seen how centralised Britain has become, and the instinct behind that centralisation is understandable. Difficult problems seem to require serious government, and serious government is often assumed to mean stronger central control.

But modern societies are not machines waiting to be operated from a control room. They are living systems: millions of people, families, businesses, communities and institutions, all interacting in ways that nobody can fully predict.

Every government, whatever its politics, eventually runs into the same reality. No small group of ministers and civil servants, however capable, can ever possess all the knowledge needed to govern a country as complex as Britain.

The cybernetician Ross Ashby explained why more than seventy years ago. His Law of Requisite Variety states, in essence, that any system capable of governing something complex must itself possess enough variety to respond to that complexity.

Britain is fantastically complex: 69 million people, cities, villages, industries, ecosystems, professions, cultures and communities, with problems constantly interacting in ways nobody can accurately predict. No government sitting in Whitehall can ever know enough to direct all of that successfully from the centre.

The answer is not less government, but government with more centres of intelligence.

That means trusting knowledge wherever it exists, rather than assuming it always flows upwards towards Westminster.

Elinor Ostrom spent much of her career studying communities that successfully managed common resources, challenging the assumption that such problems must always be solved either by privatisation or by central state control. Again and again she found successful systems built around local knowledge, participation, accountability and clearly understood responsibilities.

Her work points towards an important Liberal principle: subsidiarity. Decisions should be taken at the lowest level capable of taking them effectively.

Not because local is always better, but because decisions are usually wiser when informed by the knowledge of the people closest to the problem.

A neighbourhood should not need Whitehall permission to improve a park, nor a town to shape its own high street. A council should have serious powers over housing and transport. Regions should coordinate infrastructure and strategic investment.

National government should do the things that only national government can do well: macroeconomic policy, redistribution, national standards, defence and the protection of fundamental rights. Power, therefore, should sit at the scale of the problem.

Devolution Beyond Politicians

Yet moving power from politicians in Westminster to politicians in a town hall is not, by itself, empowering citizens. It may simply change the postcode of the people making the decisions. Genuine devolution must go further.

Councils should themselves devolve: to neighbourhoods, parishes, community organisations, schools, cooperatives, community land trusts, and sometimes directly to randomly selected citizens asked to deliberate on particularly difficult questions.

The resulting system would not resemble a neat organisational chart, but be more like an ecosystem: layered, overlapping and networked. That can look untidy from Whitehall. It is supposed to.

Complex societies are rarely governed well by tidy hierarchies - they need a diversity of institutions contributing different forms of intelligence. Councillors bring democratic legitimacy, and professionals add expertise, while residents contribute lived experience and young people understand realities that older decision-makers may not see - and vice versa.

Our job is therefore not to work out which of those voices ought to dominate the rest, but to design institutions capable of bringing all of them into conversation with one another. This is what community politics could become in the twenty-first century: not merely a way of winning elections, but a way of governing a complex society.

Government as Gardener

This also requires a different understanding of leadership. Governments often behave as though societies are machines: pull lever A, obtain outcome B. But societies are complex adaptive systems.

Leadership still matters enormously. Someone must articulate direction, make difficult choices and take responsibility when things go wrong. But the best leader of a complex system is not necessarily the person issuing the most instructions, but the one who can create the conditions in which other people can lead.

Government should therefore behave less like a machine operator and more like a gardener: preparing the soil, setting boundaries, removing obstacles, protecting the vulnerable, preventing dominant species from choking everything else, planting where necessary, encouraging diversity, noticing what thrives - and resisting the ministerial temptation to dig everything up every eighteen months.

A strong state remains essential. There are concentrations of power that no parish council or village hall can confront: global monopolies, data empires, organised crime, companies capable of playing jurisdictions off against one another. Citizens need the democratic state standing behind them.

But the state should be servant, not master: strong enough to confront concentrated power, humble enough to recognise that it does not possess all the answers itself.

Centralise Guarantees, Decentralise Agency

There is a simple principle underneath this: centralise guarantees, decentralise agency.

National government should be unapologetically strong about the things only it can guarantee. Nobody's access to decent healthcare, education, social care or economic security should depend upon the wealth of their neighbourhood. Fundamental rights should not vary from county to county. Nor should poorer communities be abandoned simply because they have less capacity to organise than richer ones.

But guaranteeing an outcome does not require Whitehall to prescribe every means of achieving it.

Social care offers a good example. Government has an essential responsibility to ensure that people can get good care when they need it, that carers are properly valued and that catastrophic costs do not destroy families' security. Those are national responsibilities. But care itself happens in places and relationships. It involves councils, the NHS, care providers, families, neighbours, charities, community groups and, above all, the person receiving care. A system designed primarily around institutional boundaries will struggle to respond to the complexity of an actual human life.

The task of government is therefore not simply to deliver more services downwards. It is to build the conditions in which people and institutions closer to the ground can solve problems together.

That means money and authority, but also capability. Simply transferring responsibility from Whitehall to an under-resourced council or struggling community is not devolution.

Devolution without capability is abandonment, while capability without devolution is paternalism.

A genuinely Liberal government would invest in both. It would provide communities with access to expertise, patient finance, data, convening capacity and people able to connect institutions and help local ideas become viable projects. It would notice where communities are already solving problems and ask how government can remove the obstacles in their way.

This is generative government: government that measures its success not by how much activity it controls, but by how much capacity it creates in the rest of society.

The strongest state, on this view, is not necessarily the one doing the most things itself. It is the one that enables the greatest number of people and institutions to contribute intelligently to the common good.

Stronger Communities

I see glimpses of this philosophy every week in the South Cotswolds. My constituency has taught me something important: many of the solutions to our problems already exist. They are simply disconnected from one another.

When I launched Stronger South Cotswolds – a forum to facilitate collaboration and resource-sharing across local groups, charities and businesses - this year, it was partly an admission of reality. There was not a giant pot of money, either locally or nationally, waiting to solve every local problem. So we asked a different question: what do we already have? Flood action groups, farmers, community pantries, sustainability groups, friendship cafés, Men's Sheds - extraordinary people quietly darning holes in the fabric of their communities, often with very limited resources. We call them our Local Legends.

The problem was rarely that solutions did not exist. More often, it was that people working on one part of the puzzle had never met the people working on another. Connect them and something remarkable begins to happen. Knowledge flows, relationships form, resources are shared and new possibilities emerge. Government may not be able to manufacture those relationships, but it can make them easier.

And again, not everyone has to become a Local Legend. A society with strong neighbourhood institutions benefits the person who never attends a community meeting just as much as the person who chairs three of them. Community is partly what other people quietly do for us. Strong communities create resilience because relationships exist before the crisis arrives. Anyone who has attended a flood meeting understands this instinctively. The most valuable asset is not always a drainage map. Often it is knowing who owns the tractor, who has

a spare room, and who will answer the phone at two o'clock in the morning when the water starts rising.

That capacity does not show up in GDP. Lose it, however, and a country becomes poorer in ways that eventually appear everywhere else.

Nature and the Common Good

The same philosophy extends beyond people. Liberals have understood this for generations, long before climate change became mainstream political territory. There is a simple reason: pollution is an assault on the common good.

John Stuart Mill argued that a world with every wild place eliminated holds no attraction, that unlimited growth was not the goal, but rather a settled economy focused on human flourishing. When a company makes money while leaving the public with a soil exhausted of nutrients, it is not creating prosperity, but privatising the gain while socialising the loss. A society that destroys habitats and calls the resulting activity "economic growth" has confused accounting with value.

A flourishing society cannot exist on a degraded planet. Nature forms the foundation of everything we are. Healthy soil, clean air, functioning rivers, biodiversity and a stable climate are essential infrastructure. And here again economics shapes behaviour. Reward extraction and we will get more extraction. Reward stewardship and we will get more stewardship.

Farmers should be able to earn a good living not only from producing food, but from producing clean water, healthy soil and flood resilience. Community energy should allow local people to share directly in the value created by the wind and the sun. Polluters should pay the real costs they impose on society. And government should consciously consider the interests of future generations, who have no voice in Westminster to argue for themselves.

Intergenerational equity, as set out by Edith Brown Weiss back in the 1980s, recognised that we are temporary custodians of the natural world. We inherited a great gift - it is not for us to use and abuse, but to care for and pass on with pride.

Technology and the Next Concentration of Power

The important political question is not whether AI is good or bad. It is: who owns it, who controls the data, who captures the wealth, who makes the decisions, and who benefits from the extraordinary productivity gains it may create? Right now, the honest answer is a remarkably small number of companies, and an even smaller number of people, accountable to no electorate on Earth.

Every technological revolution redistributes power before it redistributes prosperity.

Technology could liberate enormous amounts of human capacity. It could transform medicine, education and scientific discovery. It could remove drudgery from working life. Or it could hand a handful of already powerful corporations unprecedented influence over how the rest of us live, work and think. Left to drift, that is exactly what will happen. That is simply what concentrated power does when nobody chooses otherwise. It is a choice, and perhaps only for a short while longer will it remain ours to make.

Suppose AI dramatically increases productivity. Why should the entire dividend appear only as higher profits and greater consumption? Some could become higher wages. Some could become better public services. Some could restore nature.

And some could become something increasingly precious: time. That could mean shorter working weeks, more time for caring, volunteering, living. Freedom requires time as well as money. A country that hands the gains of automation entirely to shareholders will ultimately have too little of both.

Chapter 4: Britain 2035: Know the Destination

One of the most important lessons I learned rowing oceans is that direction matters more than speed. At sea you can work extraordinarily hard and still travel in the wrong direction as storms push you the wrong way, equipment fails, and uncontrollable winds and currents dictate your fate.

But you have to know where you are trying to go.

Politics could learn something from navigation. Governments arrive with manifestos containing hundreds of promises, but that is not the same thing as painting a picture of the future they are trying to create. Imagine instead that an incoming government began its first Cabinet meeting with a single question.

What kind of country are we trying to become?

Suppose the answer was this. By 2035, we want Britain to be a country in which:

- everyone has enough security to live without constant fear;
- every child has a genuine opportunity to develop their talents;
- more people own a meaningful stake in the businesses, homes and assets around them;
- excellent universal public services underpin freedom;
- communities possess real power and resources;
- local economies retain far more of the wealth they create;
- work leaves room for life;
- nature is recovering;
- wealth cannot buy disproportionate political influence; and
- every generation expects to leave the country in better condition than it inherited it.

Then hold yourself accountable for getting there.

GDP still matters. But so do healthy life expectancy, median incomes, wealth distribution, housing affordability, biodiversity, wellbeing, and whether people feel that public institutions have their best interests at heart.

What we choose to measure reveals what we truly value. Government's first responsibility is to know the destination and then reverse engineer the journey. Without a destination, every headwind feels like failure, but with one, even setbacks become part of the voyage.

A Journey, Not a Big Bang

No government can create this society with one Budget or one Act of Parliament. Nor should it try. Complex systems rarely change through one dramatic intervention; they evolve because institutions, incentives and culture begin reinforcing one another.

The first stage is to change the rules of the game: give local government genuine fiscal and political autonomy; strengthen the universal foundations of economic security; make employee and community ownership easier; strengthen competition policy against monopolies; give communities meaningful rights over local assets; and change national accounting so that wellbeing, resilience and nature sit alongside economic growth.

Then build the alternatives: community energy, local food networks, cooperative housing, employee-owned companies, community land trusts and regional investment institutions.

Some will succeed brilliantly where others will fail; that is how healthy systems learn. Instead of the traditional Whitehall model of pilot, evaluation, guidance document and compulsory national rollout, government should become much better at experimenting, evaluating, sharing and adapting.

Gradually ownership begins to shift. People become not merely employees and consumers, but owners, citizens and stewards. The feedback loops begin working in our favour. Community energy keeps money circulating locally, lowering bills and building trust. Local procurement strengthens local businesses, which employ local people, strengthen the tax base and help high streets recover. Success creates the capacity for more success.

That is how enduring change happens. Not because ministers command millions of people to behave differently, but because millions of people respond to incentives that make better choices easier.

Democracy Beyond Westminster

There will always be national decisions that divide us. That is democracy.

Proportional representation would create a Parliament that better reflects the people it serves and encourage parties to work together rather than pretend that 35 per cent of the vote entitles one side to govern the other 65. But electoral reform is only one part of democratic renewal.

Voting every few years is a remarkably thin understanding of citizenship. We need stronger councils and parish governments, but also citizens' juries, participatory budgeting and new ways for people genuinely to shape the places where they live. Citizens' assemblies can be invaluable for particularly difficult questions, but they are not a substitute for representative democracy or effective local government. The deeper principle is pluralism, because different democratic institutions gather different kinds of knowledge. An election takes the temperature of a nation, while a parish council knows which lane floods

in November; a cooperative knows what its members will actually pay for, while a well-run assembly can hold a difficult trade-off in view long enough to think it through properly.

A mature democracy does not require everyone to participate in everything, all of the time. What it does require is for everyone to know that, when something truly matters, there is somewhere meaningful to turn. Democracy is about legitimacy, true, but it is also about drawing on the wisdom dispersed throughout society, and this is where Liberalism shines.

No Single Party Can Do This

There is one final implication. A philosophy founded on distributed intelligence cannot plausibly be designed by one leader, one party or one think tank. The process must embody the destination.

We need local and national government, businesses and trade unions, cooperatives and employee-owned firms, universities and farmers, the NHS and other anchor institutions, charities and community organisations, economists and technologists, and citizens who have never joined a political party in their lives.

Liberal Democrats should be confident enough to convene rather than insist on owning every answer. There is wisdom to learn from social democracy, conservatism, environmentalism, the cooperative tradition and business. The task is not to produce an ideologically pure Liberal blueprint. It is to help build a durable national settlement around a simple proposition.

A good society distributes the capacity to flourish.

Security, knowledge, assets, time, political influence, opportunity, ownership and responsibility are all forms of power. When they become too concentrated, freedom diminishes. If distributed intelligence is our destination, then the process of getting there must itself be distributed.

Conclusion: Making Liberalism Visible Again

Ask people what Britain would look and feel like after ten years of Liberal Democrat government and many would struggle to answer. That is not because our individual policies are not good. Many are remarkably popular. The problem is that they do not add up, in the public imagination, to a coherent picture of the country we are trying to create.

We have sometimes made a virtue of being reasonable, practical and evidence-led. Those are qualities I value, but competence is not a destination.

Politics also requires imagination: the ability to help people see a different future and believe that it might actually be possible. But that vision also needs coherence. Voters need to know, with crystal clarity, what we stand for and who we stand with.

A political party needs to be recognisable before it can be persuasive. The human brain is, among other things, a prediction-making machine: we navigate the world by forming expectations about what will happen next. Political parties are no different. People want to feel that they know us well enough to predict, with reasonable confidence, where we will stand when the next unexpected issue arises. If our underlying values are clear, the position should make intuitive sense. If they cannot predict us, they will not quite trust us; and in the absence of that confidence, they are likely to turn away.

As previously discussed, the populist right understands this very well. It offers a story of a country that has lost control, it identifies people to blame, and it promises that a sufficiently strong leader can take that control back. Its power lies in taking grievances that are often real and weaving them into a story that is simple, emotionally compelling and dangerously misleading. To people who feel ignored, insecure or desperate for change, that story can be enormously persuasive. It gives their frustration an explanation, their anger a target, and their powerlessness the promise of an answer.

Liberals need to offer something more hopeful and more radical. Our answer to powerlessness should not be to promise that better people in Westminster will exercise power on everyone's behalf. It should be to give people their own power.

Imagine a Britain where your postcode does not determine your chances in life, but your community has real power over the things that make it distinctive. Where starting a family, changing career or growing old does not carry the constant fear of financial catastrophe. Where towns and neighbourhoods own more of their land, energy and assets. Where more employees have a stake in the companies they help build. Where local institutions can spend public money in ways that strengthen the places they serve. Where nature is recovering and the wealth of the future is not being consumed to finance the present.

Imagine government feeling less like a distant machine that occasionally does things to you, and more like an enabling infrastructure around your life: there when you need security or protection, but otherwise giving you, your family and your community room to act. That is a country in which power has moved outwards.

It is why electoral reform, economic reform, community ownership, universal public services, devolution, environmental stewardship and action against monopoly are not separate items on a Liberal Democrat shopping list. They are different expressions of the same purpose. We want to distribute the capacity to flourish.

This is the story Liberalism has been missing.

The great divide in twenty-first-century politics may not ultimately be between left and right. It may be between those who believe security requires concentrating power and those who believe a resilient society distributes it. And Liberalism needs to make clear which side of that argument it is on.

Liberalism's Next Chapter

I came to politics late in life, and by an unusual route. What jolted me off the tram tracks of a conventional existence was writing two obituaries for myself: one for the life I was living, one for the life I hoped to have lived. The gap between them revealed that I was heading in precisely the wrong direction.

Years later, alone in a rowing boat thousands of miles from land, I learned another lesson. Even when progress feels impossible, it can be made - one oarstroke at a time. Tiny actions, performed consistently, accumulate to cross vast oceans.

Britain does not need another political saviour. It needs direction: leadership capable of describing that direction, institutions capable of learning, a state strong enough to protect the public interest, and millions of people with enough security, ownership and freedom to shape their own futures.

I see that possibility every week. It is there in the volunteer running a food pantry, in the farmer bringing a wetland back to life, in the councillor who spends three patient years campaigning to make one dangerous junction safe, and in the people quietly getting on with running community energy schemes and repair cafés and flood groups. Most will never describe what they are doing as Liberalism, but that scarcely matters. They are demonstrating something Liberals have always believed, which is that the future is not handed down from above, but built by people.

Our task is not to tell anyone how to live, but to ensure that poverty

does not crush their dreams, monopolies do not exploit them, and environmental destruction does not steal the inheritance of future generations. And then to trust them.

That is the great Liberal wager: not that people are perfect, nor that government is unnecessary. But that society becomes stronger when more people possess the security, opportunity and freedom to shape their own lives, contribute to their communities, and take responsibility for the things they care about.

For too long, Britain has concentrated power and then wondered why people feel powerless. We have weakened communities and then worried about social fragmentation. We have prized private wealth while allowing our shared inheritance to decay. We have borrowed from the future to sustain the present, leaving those who come after us to pay the price.

We can choose differently. But the window will not remain open forever. Power does not disperse itself. Wealth does not share itself. Nature does not recover simply because we wish it would. Every year we delay, more decisions are taken out of our hands by those with no interest in surrendering their advantage.

So this is the choice before us: to cling to systems that diminish our agency, exhaust our communities and consume our future, or to begin distributing the security, opportunity and power that allow people to shape their own lives.

And Liberal Democrats must find the courage to plant our flag in that future, and invite the country to join us there. We cannot remain the polite custodians of a political tradition whose radicalism we are reluctant to proclaim. Nor can we expect a collection of sensible policies to tell the story for us. We must show people, with passion and persuasion, what Liberalism can do for Britain: how it can return power to their hands, rebuild the places they call home and offer a future that feels not only fairer, but freer, richer and more alive.

That is the great Liberal task of our age: not to impose a single vision of the good society from above, but to release the capacity of people, communities and nature to flourish together. To trust people with power. To govern with them, not merely for them. And to leave the future more abundant than we found it.

That, to me, is Liberalism alive.

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The Progressive Puzzle

The term 'progressive' is used extensively by those of us not on the right of the political spectrum – Compass very much included. But there is often much debate over what 'progressive' actually means and what 'progressivism' actually is.

This new paper, authored by former Director Policy at Number 10 and Professor at UCL, Geoff

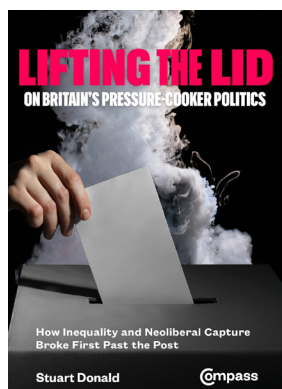
Mulgan, aims to answer these questions. By situating the modern form of progressivism in the wider, historic progressive tradition, as well as defining key policy areas progressives could coalesce around, the paper is a valuable resource for all of us trying to bring about the Good Society.

What is the Soft Left?

The 'soft left', particularly within the Labour Party, is a term much like the Internet: everyone uses it but nobody really knows what it is. It's assumed as encompassing everything that isn't the 'hard left' or the 'Labour right'. But in the swings between Corbyn and Starmer, the soft left has regained traction.



This paper by Eric Shaw, Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Stirling, aims to define this more clearly by tracing the history of the soft left as a grouping within the Labour Party, its fortunes and misfortunes over the past half-century, its re-emergence in the mid-2020s and the trajectory it remains on. All of this comes together to answer the question: what is the soft left?



Lifting the Lid on Britain's Pressure Cooker Politics: How Inequality and Neoliberal Capture Broke First Past the Post

For too long, Britain's ills have been treated like an inevitability. We have no idea how we got here and if we only put our mind to it we can figure it out.

Drawing upon 40 years of data on regional deprivation and voting trends, Lifting the Lid draws together Margaret Thatcher's accentuated

Parliamentary majorities in the 1980s, neoliberalism's direct part in creating this country's extensive regional inequalities, the Brexit vote and now the level of support we are seeing for right-wing populists.

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