

Pocket Guide to Liberal Democrat Policies

May 2008

Applicability

Liberal Democrats have championed devolution of powers to Scotland and Wales. That means that policies in those nations are increasingly different from those in England - reflecting different choices, priorities and circumstances, and often the influence of Liberal Democrats in government. This guide sets out our plans for a Liberal Democrat Government in Westminster. Our Scottish and Welsh Parties publish their own policies on devolved matters.

Note

This guide outlines key policies at March 2008. As some policies are updated at each Party Conference, please refer to conference motions or briefings on the party website www.libdems.org.uk as necessary until this guide is updated.

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THE GREEN THREAD

The environment has always been a priority concern for Liberal Democrats.

Caring for the environment and tackling climate change should be the responsibility of all government departments and agencies.

The Liberal Democrats recognise this and have a 'green thread' of action in every area of policy.

This is reflected throughout this guide.

ENVIRONMENT AND ENERGY

Zero-Carbon Britain - We are the first party to aim for a carbon neutral Britain where we absorb as much carbon as we emit by 2050. We will achieve this by ensuring 100 per cent of the UK's electricity comes from clean sources without the use of nuclear power stations; making homes greener and improving public transport. We will provide incentives for renewable technologies and make Britain a greener, healthier place to live.

Tackling climate change - taking a global lead. Liberal Democrat plans to make Britain carbon neutral by 2050 mean we will ensure we meet our targets from the Kyoto Protocol well before the deadline. We will lead negotiations for the next stage of international agreements on climate change, bringing in the developing countries excluded from the initial Kyoto Protocol and press nations that have rejected the Kyoto Protocol, such as the USA, to accept that emissions reduction targets are vital.

Sustainable Housing. The Liberal Democrats will set national targets to reduce carbon dioxide emissions from the UK's housing by at least 60% by 2050. We will ensure that the UK complies with the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive so that we are not prosecuted by the European Court of Justice. We would raise the requirements of Building Regulations to ensure that our homes are energy efficient. This would help to curb Britain's carbon emissions as well as tackling fuel poverty.

Tax pollution not people. The Lib Dems want to reverse the decline in green taxation under Labour, and use the revenue to cut income tax. We will cut income tax and increase taxes on carbon emissions and other resource usage that causes global warming. So the more you go green, the more money you save.

Renewable energy, not nuclear energy – We oppose construction of further nuclear power stations. More nuclear power is a barrier to green growth, as it will soak up subsidy, hinder development of Britain's vast renewable resources and lead to nuclear proliferation – increasing global security risks.

GOVERNMENT & CIVIL LIBERTIES

For the people, by the people – We would involve the British people in producing a written constitution for Britain. This would reform and reinvigorate the democratic process, putting individuals back in control. We would lower the voting age to 16, establish a fair, proportional voting system for elections to Westminster and local government, and decentralise decision making. We will reform the House of Lords, replacing it with an elected second chamber.

The power to be different – We will implement the devolution of power to parish, town and community councils so that the right people are making the right decisions. Councils will be allowed greater financial independence and autonomy by increasing the amount of money councils spend which is raised locally; in the long term 75% (rather than the current 25%) of total revenue should be raised locally.

Open Government – We will operate transparent and open government with strong Freedom of Information legislation. The Data Protection Act will be reformed to accurately reflect the nature of today's surveillance society. We will increase the accountability of the Information Commission and review its funding.

Stop government interference in our lives – We will introduce legislation to protect our most important liberties. We will remove the right of the state to retain DNA records of people who do not have a criminal record, restore the right to protest, revise Control Orders, and protect judges' independence. We will also scrap ID cards and use the money to pay for more police.

Restore the public's trust – We support reform of party political funding with caps on individual donations and procedures to ensure transparency in party spending.

Green Action:

Make government greener – We will establish reporting obligations for government and business as part of an Environmental Responsibility Act, holding government as well as business to account.

BUSINESS AND ENTERPRISE

Set business free – We will cut red tape to enable business to get on with business. We will cut business rates for small businesses, beef up competition policy and make government contracting more transparent. As part of this process we will abolish BERR, cutting the department's bureaucratic and wasteful functions such as business subsidies; other functions would be transferred to more appropriate departments. This will save around £1 billion pounds of taxpayers' money per annum which we will invest in other priorities.

Protect the rights of the consumer – We will ensure customers get a fair deal by making watchdogs more powerful and accessible.

A brighter future for post offices and Royal Mail – The post office network is in severe decline after decades of under-funding and neglect. Our policy would generate £2 billion for real investment and secure the futures of the post network.

Green Action:

Accounting for the Environment – UK companies are responsible for 12-15% of emissions globally. Britain must take the lead in calling for effective, standardised and simple environmental reporting for business. We will improve environmental reporting so that large and medium sized organisations, and all government departments, are able to produce accurate one page reports. These will show emissions levels and the amount of raw materials and sustainable sourcing used. All small organisations will be assisted in achieving environmental targets.

Growing Green Business – By creating real incentives for businesses and individuals to go green through our green tax switch, as well as changes in general demand, environmentally friendly technology can become a booming market. We want to make Britain a leading exporter in technology that is both environmentally friendly and cutting edge.

LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Local decisions on local homes, schools, and green space – We will scrap the ‘Whitehall knows best’ rules and targets that mess up and delay decisions about key local issues. Local people will be set free to make the key decisions about their area and about improving local services, with real powers and responsibilities devolved to local communities and their councils.

Fair taxes raised and spent locally – Council Tax bears no relation to people’s ability to pay and penalises pensioners and people on low incomes, who pay a far higher proportion of their income in tax than the very rich. We would scrap Council Tax and replace it with Local Income Tax, which is fair and affordable. We will return Business Rates to local control too, so local people decide how their locally raised taxes are spent.

Provide affordable homes – We will tackle the housing crisis by providing affordable housing which remains affordable in the long term as well as increasing the stock of social housing to rent. In particular we will use equity mortgages and shared ownership schemes to provide affordable homes for local people and first-time buyers. We will release public sector land to Community Land Trusts, taking out the cost of buying land to develop, so they can build thousands of affordable homes for their local communities. We will reform VAT to encourage developers to repair and re-use empty buildings and Brownfield land. In areas where second homes are overwhelming the local housing market, we will require people to get planning permission before turning another full-time home into a holiday home.

Green Action:

Strong Communities needn’t cost the earth – We will reduce carbon emissions from the UK’s housing by more than 60% by 2050, setting new standards for new housing and refurbishing existing housing. This will not only cut greenhouse gas emissions but also household bills. We will also support councils in delivering sustainable development increasing public spaces and parks, and using their road system to support green modes of transport.

ECONOMY

Tackling the 'credit crunch' - The Liberal Democrats want to ensure that the current 'credit crunch' does not become a full blown recession. We would offer help to the millions of families being squeezed by massive debts, high fuel and food prices and high mortgage repayments by cutting income tax. We would ensure the banks pay for their own mistakes not the taxpayer. We will act to ensure that repossession is used only as a last resort and that people are able to stay in their homes. We will take action against irresponsible lending and ensure that everyone has access to good financial education and independent financial advice.

Reducing the burden – The current tax system is making Britain more unequal everyday. Our system will be fairer without raising tax overall. We will tax income less and pollution more. We would therefore cut the basic rate of income tax by 4p, abolish unfair Council Tax and replace it with a tax based on the ability to pay. We would increase environmental taxes such as Air Passenger Duty, limit tax relief on pension contributions to the basic rate, and reform residential stamp duty. Inheritance tax would be reformed and gains made by non-residents on property situated in the UK brought within Capital Gains Tax.

Saving to spend – We will spend up to an extra £20bn a year to ease the burden on families and pensioners by cutting quangos and bureaucracy from public services and cancelling costly and unnecessary schemes such as nuclear power and ID cards and by withdrawing British forces from Iraq. We will stop the taxpayers being ripped off by PFI and IT contractors and consultants. We are the only party to spell out the tough spending choices we will make to spend more on health, education and law and order without raising taxes. We are committed to financial stability and discipline.

Green Action:

Using economic instruments to benefit the environment – Environmental taxes and traded permits can be used to encourage people to act in an environmentally sustainable way. We will launch an Environmental Incentive Programme within the Treasury to advise government and Parliament on ways to reform taxes and incentives to encourage sustainable development. Green taxes mean taxing differently – not taxing more.

EDUCATION

Targeting money where it's needed most – We will invest more in providing high quality early years care and deliver cash directly to the front line with a Pupil Premium which would attach additional funding to individual children from disadvantaged backgrounds. We would scrap the ill-thought through schemes like the Child Trust Fund and redirect the money to where it's needed most.

No one size fits all approach to education – We will ensure that education is tailored to individuals' needs by allowing all young people to mix academic and vocational learning, and making degrees more flexible to fit round people's lives.

Cut class sizes – We will reduce class sizes to an average of 20 for 5-7 year olds and 25 for 7-11 year olds, employing 21,000 more primary school teachers to fulfil this pledge.

Every child taught English, Maths, Science, Languages and ICT by a suitably qualified teacher – We will give secondary schools the funding for high quality teacher training courses, to guarantee that all children will be taught at least the core subjects of English, Maths, Science, Foreign Languages and ICT by suitably qualified teachers.

No tuition fees, no top-up fees – We believe that a place at university should be based on ability to learn not ability to manage debt. We will scrap fees and offer £2k grants to those with household incomes under £15k and maintenance loans of up to £4,100 to those who need them.

Green Action:

Building Green Schools – All plans for new buildings under the Building Schools for the Future Programme and our 'Colleges for the Future' programme must be good for the environment as well as good for education.

HEALTH

Give the NHS back to the people – Too often decisions are taken to shut clinics, wards or entire hospitals, where nobody asked what local people thought, or nobody listened to what they said following sham consultation. Local people pay for the NHS and should shape how it is run – not Whitehall or unelected officials. We will set up elected local health boards that will be accountable directly to local people for their decisions.

Fund Personal Care – We will invest an extra £2 billion to pay for a ‘universal care payment’ based on an individual’s need, not their ability to pay, for those aged over 65, who require personal care. This would slash care costs for individuals and guarantee a minimum standard of care for those who need it. We will also scrap charges for eye and dental checks, review prescription charges.

Introduce a Patient Contract – We would guarantee every citizen access to a high standard of core healthcare entitlements within maximum waiting times. To make sure that the NHS delivers, patients would have the right to receive private treatment, paid for by the NHS, if the waiting time was not met.

Free the NHS from Government meddling – We will end Government meddling in the NHS, letting staff get on with their jobs and meaning shorter waiting times, cleaner hospitals and more personalised care.

Keeping people healthy, not just treating the sick – Prevention is as important as cure. We will introduce targeted health MOTs, wider access to screening tests and personal care plans.

Tackle the Dentist Crisis – We will create incentives for dentists to treat patients in the greatest need. The performance of our dentists will be monitored to ensure that standards are kept high. We will also promote preventive oral health.

Green Action:

Clean air and water – We support implementation of the EU Registration, Evaluation and Authorisation of Chemicals (REACH) Directive, which will ensure information is available to the public on the consequences of exposure to all chemicals in daily use, and that those of high concern are replaced by safer alternatives.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

Upholding International Law – we believe that national security, spreading democracy and respect for human rights and preventing international terrorism are best achieved through international co-operation. Britain must work through the UN, and the EU, as well as with the US.

Make Europe more democratic, transparent and accountable – The EU has been instrumental in promoting peace, stability, democracy and human rights across Europe and has strengthened the security of the UK and is central to the UK's economic prosperity. However, to be successful with a membership of 27 the EU must reform and ensure that its role is clearly defined and limited.

Meeting defence commitments at home and abroad – With increasing overseas commitments, our troops are overstretched; we should not be cutting the size of our armed forces whilst asking them to take on ever more difficult tasks. By switching funding from unnecessary programmes, for example by scaling back the Eurofighter programme, we will be able to invest more in protecting the welfare of our forces, ensuring they are well-trained and well-equipped. Our foreign policy must be realistic about what our armed forces can, and should, take on abroad.

The future of Britain's nuclear deterrent – We want Britain to take the lead in working towards global nuclear disarmament at the 2010 Non Proliferation Treaty review conference. We must set an example with a 50% unilateral cut in nuclear warheads, and retain a multilateral negotiating position on further warhead reductions and systems replacement.

Green Action:

Leading on climate change – Liberal Democrat plans will ensure Britain exceeds its targets from the Kyoto Protocol well before the deadline. We will lead negotiations for the next stage of international agreements on climate change, bringing in the developing countries excluded from the initial Kyoto Protocol and press nations that have rejected the Kyoto Protocol, such as the USA and Australia, to accept that emissions reduction targets are vital.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Water and development – We must support investment in public sector water and sanitation infrastructure. Provide advice and assistance in achieving efficiency in water development through the public sector. Adopt a long-term perspective to ensure sustainability in the environment through promoting the recycling of all forms of human waste and by protecting and reinstating ecosystems.

Meeting Britain's promise on aid – We are committed to realising a world free from poverty. In order to help achieve the UN Millennium Development Goals by 2015 (which include eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, providing universal primary education, and combating HIV/AIDS) the UK needs to provide more effective international assistance. Liberal Democrats will increase British Aid spending to 0.7% of Gross National Income by 2011 at the latest.

Fair Trade – Rich countries still operate subsidies and tariff barriers that hit the poorest countries in the world. We will seek to break down these barriers, and promote trade and investment in developing countries. Dumping of subsidised agricultural exports by developed countries wrecks local farming in Africa and other parts of the world. Liberal Democrats believe this scandal must stop.

Tackle the arms trade – Britain must take the lead in working towards the establishment of an International Arms Trade Treaty. We will establish a Parliamentary Arms Export Committee to monitor arms exports and scrutinise individual licence applications..

Green Action:

Take strong global action to protect the environment – We will promote a review of the World Bank, World Trade Organisation and the International Monetary Fund to ensure that they are sensitive to the needs of the poorest, and promote sustainable and effective development outcomes. We will ensure that development aid is targeted on projects that are environmentally sustainable.

LAW AND ORDER

Together we can cut crime – Local communities will have the power to tackle minor cases of anti-social behaviour through new community panels where offenders have to make amends to victims and communities with through visible community sentences. Prison-based work schemes will be expanded to provide previous offenders with realistic alternatives to crime, easing the pressure on the prison service and on the British tax payer. We will impose compulsory rehabilitation, training and paid work in prison, including a scheme in which a proportion of money earned will be paid into a Common Fund for victims. We will allocate resources to new secure mental health and drug treatment centres rather than new prisons.

Guns and Gangs – We will set up a 24-hour border force that would incorporate immigration, customs and police at all UK ports to stop the presence of guns on our streets. Local authorities and police would be given real power to tackle gun and gang crime locally. We will also ensure that areas where gun crime incidents are high are allocated additional resources.

Firm but fair on immigration and refugees – We will create an integrated border police force bringing back entry and exit controls to monitor movement in and out of Britain. By running immigration and asylum services fairly and efficiently, we will ensure that all migrants pay their way through taxes and we will cut the number who work illegally or turn to crime.

Tackle terrorism – We will reform our courts to prosecute terror suspects more effectively. Restrictions imposed on people without trial risks increasing support for extremists. Our reforms: plea bargaining for “supergrasses”, intercept evidence in court, and questioning after charge – will be effective and fair. We will improve cooperation between UK anti terror bodies and reach out to young men in Muslim Communities.

Green Action:

Making the Polluter Pay - We will improve pollution controls with strong Environment Agency inspectors, and a new specialist Environmental Court to deal with polluters.

PENSIONS AND BENEFITS

Introduce a Citizen's Pension – We will immediately restore the earnings link to the state pension so that pensioners share in the growing wealth of the nation. We will also work to create a Citizen's Pension set at a decent level and based on residency not outdated National Insurance contributions within two parliaments. This will take over a third of pensioners off means-testing, ensuring that private saving is worthwhile for everybody.

Reform the Tax Credit system – We will return to fixed term awards of six months to end the fluctuations and bureaucracy in the present Tax Credits system, caused by repeated over and under-payments and the uncertainty that this causes for millions of families each year.

Reform the New Deal to get more people into sustainable employment – The New Deal puts too many people on unnecessary or ineffective employment schemes rather than into real jobs. Rather than continuing with the one size fits all policy, we will tailor assistance to meet the individual needs and aspirations of jobseekers so that they get the package of support they need to get back into sustainable employment.

Provide more support for people with disabilities – We will help severely disabled people of working age with their fuel bills by giving them the same £200 a year Winter Fuel Payment that pensioners receive.

Green Action:

Fuel Poverty, Green Solutions - 2.5 million households live in fuel poverty – that is, they have to spend 10 per cent of their income on heating in order to maintain a barely comfortable temperature. If we are to improve the lives of the poorest in society, we must reduce fuel costs by improving energy efficiency. This will also play a major role in reducing the UK's carbon dioxide emissions. We will subsidise home insulation to cut heating costs. and we will ensure that energy utility companies no longer penalise the poor by ending differential pricing.

RURAL AFFAIRS

Affordable housing in rural areas – We will provide more homes for local people by increasing councils' fiscal and planning powers over second homes and promoting schemes such as 'Equity Mortgage' affordable homes.

First class public services in rural areas – We understand that the Post Office can be the hub of many small communities; we will invest £2 billion to ensure they stay open. We will launch a government review of broadband coverage and quality in remote areas. We will also seek EU permission to grant lower fuel taxes and a 50% discount on road tax in sparsely populated areas on all but the most polluting cars. We will also give councils' greater powers to regulate bus services according to rural community needs.

A fair future for farming – We will ensure farmers and consumers get a fair price for food by creating a legally binding supermarket code enforced by an independent Food Trade Inspector. To ensure prompt farm payments, we will cut red tape by simplifying the application processes and raising the minimum threshold for payments to €100.

Save our waterways – We will give full weight to the social, economic and environmental importance of the waterway network in determining future grant levels for British Waterways. In order to reverse short term cuts arising from loss of Single Payment System income we will use contingency funds.

Green Action:

We will help farmers help the environment – We will accelerate the replacement of CAP production subsidies with payments for social goods, such as good environmental practice. We will also nurture the market for bioenergy through longer-term targets under the Renewable Transport Fuel Obligations, a new assurance scheme to ensure bioenergy is sustainably produced and transported, and reform of existing woodland tax breaks.

TRANSPORT

Investing in public transport – We believe people have a right to safe, reliable and affordable transport choices wherever they live. In both urban and rural Britain too many people are denied access to education, training and employment because of poor transport. We are the only party to argue that funding for public transport needs to reach those who are least able to pay for an alternative. We will focus on improving bus services, returning the power to control these services to local communities.

An environmentally friendly transport policy – We reject the Government's failed 'predict and provide' approach to aviation and would not build any new runway capacity in the South East of England. We also reject any new major new programmes of road building and would invest in public transport instead. Railways need to offer a viable alternative to domestic flights therefore we support proposals for new high speed lines. We will also invest in light rail which will provide environmentally sustainable community based transport links. In terms of car use, we will introduce strict new targets on new car emissions – to at least 120g/km on average by 2012 at the European level, as well as the development of alternative fuels, including biofuels. National and road user pricing will be an important tool to consider if we are to lower harmful motor emissions.

More power to local authorities – Labour has failed to tackle congestion in Britain's towns and cities. The planning system should be used to minimise the need for car use. Liberal Democrats will include promotion of safer cycling and pedestrian routes in all local transport plans. We will end the highly centralised approach to planning and empower local authorities to deal with issues such as traffic target resolution and the regulation of local bus services.

Green Action:

Green Zero-Carbon Vehicles - We will set a zero emissions target for all new cars by 2040. We will also extend targets to all other vehicles, to ensure that by 2050 all freight vehicles are running on electricity, sustainable biofuels or other renewable fuels.

ARTS & CULTURE

Cultural Britain - We recognise the enormous contribution that arts, heritage and culture make to the lives of citizens and to the economy, and the part they can play in education. The arts play a major role in building Britain's reputation worldwide. The country's museums play a vital part in community regeneration, but they have been neglected under Labour. We will invest a further £30 million per year in museums and galleries. We will invest an extra £35 million per year in Arts Council England's core budget.

Free Media - Essential to a free society is a strong and diverse media free from government interference and pressure. Independent, impartial and trusted media sources are needed across the UK and its nations and regions. We will ensure that public service broadcasting remains strong, free from interference and securely funded, not least to provide impartial news, independent of political and commercial pressures. We also recognise the vital roles that commercial radio, television and new media play. We will foster a climate in which diverse ownership and competition can thrive, and provide flexible regulation that adapts to the rapidly changing media environment.

Sport for All - Promoting sport and exercise as part of a healthy lifestyle is an important part of public health. We will use large events, like the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, to inspire the whole nation to get active. Having opposed Labour's raid on Lottery-funded sports bodies, we will provide an extra £145 million over a Parliament for community and schools sports activities and sports facilities. We will give sports fans a better deal by ensuring that they have a greater say in the running of their sports and by reviewing the events broadcast on terrestrial television.