

THE NEW LIBERAL MANIFESTO

Accessible (text-only) version of The New Liberal Manifesto

British politics is in urgent need of a new optimistic offering. A reinvigoration of liberalism holds the answer.

Increasing numbers of people despair that our political system can no longer offer a roadmap out of our current problems. The progressive forces that suffered a crushing defeat at the 2019 general election to a populist and isolationist Conservative ideology are still seeking a credible alternative.

Liberalism offers an optimistic vision for a compassionate, just and ecologically aware society and economy. Its core tenets of liberty, equality, community, environment, democracy and internationalism will protect the individual as the world goes through unprecedented technological and economic changes over the next couple of decades. As we move away from the old left-right divide in politics, liberalism's time has come again.

This manifesto sets out what liberalism is, applies it to today's political landscape, and illustrates the role it could play in helping to unite all those who long for a more hopeful alternative to the current British government.

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Not another new – or old – political creed!

Why is a revival of liberalism needed?

Less than 25 years since Labour achieved an astonishing 179-seat victory in the 1997 general election, Britain is once again facing the prospect that it will not have a non-Conservative government for at least another generation.

In the last four UK general elections, the main progressive offering has been roundly defeated. And the 2019 election was about as bad as it can get for those who hanker after a compassionate and just society promoted by a government held to account. The voters knew when they elected Boris Johnson that his relationship with the truth was tenuous, that he was surrounded by shady characters and didn't like his authority challenged, that he dismissed calls for support made eloquently by female MPs in the House of Commons as 'Humbug', and that he was happy to lace his comments with a strange mixture of racism, fantasism and Latin as the mood took him. But they elected him nonetheless (or 44% did, which is as much as most majority governments in Britain get). Even allowing for the Brexit fatigue that made Johnson's 'Get Brexit Done' slogan remarkably effective, the people still put their trust in a haphazard old Etonian.

That rams home the message that any alternative government with a chance to get elected must be plausible, credible and radiate hope. Even leaving aside the fact that many voters in 2019 couldn't see Jeremy Corbyn as Prime Minister, Labour failed to enthuse people that it had a viable offering. Indeed many of its traditional voters deserted Labour in droves.

We have been here before. In 1992, Labour lost a fourth successive election and looked incapable of winning, yet five years later it won one of the biggest majorities in British parliamentary history. Could that happen again? Most psephologists and political observers say it is highly unlikely. The collapse of Labour's traditional dominance in Scotland, and the control of both print and social media by conservative forces, mean Labour almost certainly can't win on its own, even if the government proves unpopular and runs a bad campaign at the next election.

But there's another factor at play. Traditionally, politics has been fought out on a left-right spectrum, where the left favours a large degree of state intervention and the right stands for minimal interference in the free market. In recent years, British politics has been fought more on a spectrum ranging from inward looking to outward looking. This was highlighted most clearly by the near 50:50 divide between Remain and Leave in the 2016 EU referendum, but it has its legacy in the new battlegrounds of nationalist v internationalist, identity v diversity, closed v open, or any other way of describing it.

The Conservative victory in 2019 was the triumph of the nationalist, national identity, tribalist side of the new political dyad. For the Conservatives to be defeated, it will require a credible offering that convinces voters that an internationalist, respectful, diverse approach that borrows elements from the old left and old right will bring

better results than the current government. And it will probably have to be offered by several parties working in some form of harmony.

This is where liberalism comes in as an ideology. It just has to be reinvigorated, and with two purposes in mind.

1. The main one is that the Liberal Democrats are likely to play a key role in any defeat of the Conservatives, simply because they are much better placed to beat the Conservatives than Labour in almost 100 parliamentary seats. Yet for the Lib Dems to play this role, they have to stand for something. Tactical considerations over recent decades have meant the Lib Dems have become in the public's eye a compromise or half-way house between Labour and Conservatives rather than a party that actually stands for something. In an era of instant media via the internet, that will no longer wash. Indeed it risks the Lib Dems being seen as 'Yellow Tories' to disappointed Labour supporters, and 'closet socialists' to cynical Conservatives. Therefore the Liberal Democrats need to restate their party creed, so voters know what they are voting for.

2. The second reason is that a restatement of traditional liberalism for today's political landscape will come very close to encapsulating the compassionate, internationalist, diverse package of policies that will need to underpin a credible alternative to a re-elected Conservative government. In addition, liberalism's inherent belief in cooperation means it offers a chance to reimagine the tribal politics we currently have so that cooperation among parties becomes as accepted as it has been for years in most mainland European countries.

With a new industrial revolution happening, and at the same time as the need to tackle climate change, with geopolitical tensions and possibly more pandemics rumbling on in the background, it's easy to be fearful about the future. This is where liberalism's intrinsic optimism comes in. With the individual facing the prospect of being reduced to a number or a byte in a tech- and data-driven society, a political philosophy based on the primacy of the individual and individual liberty can come back into vogue – as long as the Lib Dems project liberalism as the basis of what they stand for.

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As sceptical of the state as of big business

What is liberalism?

The original liberals were motivated by a wish to promote the rights of the individual against those imposing constraints on personal liberty. Initially that meant fighting against edicts imposed by the church, but gradually the fight became more against restrictions imposed by wider society. In the 19th century, British liberalism developed into a broader movement aimed at containing both interference from governments and the reach of forces that profit from the free market.

That eventually led to the approach taken by various liberal thinkers and MPs in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that became known as 'New Liberalism'. It sought not only to protect individuals from constraints and malign forces but also to lay the ground for the state to play a part in ensuring basic standards of welfare. The underlying principle was that liberty would not be protected without some intervention by the state. As such, under British liberalism the state would have an active role to play in alleviating poverty, squalor and ignorance without which true freedom could not flourish, and the Liberal governments of the early 20th century laid the foundations for the welfare state.

There are half a dozen core tenets of liberalism. Liberal philosophers and historians might categorise them differently, but they all agree that the basic tenets or values are always there, and are not bendable to the whims of political pragmatism. Policies can be adapted to prevailing conditions, mainly to bring a candidate or party in tune with the challenges of the day, but the fundamental values should always remain the same even if fighting for them sometimes brings no obvious electoral benefit.

The core tenets of liberalism

Liberty

This is the central value from which liberalism gets its name. Personal liberty is not the freedom to do whatever one wants, but the freedom to be oneself, develop one's personality and one's life as one wants, up to the point where it infringes the right of others to do the same. It is not fundamentally an economic concept, but a matter of self-determination coupled with the protection of creativity. In his book *On Liberty*, the 19th century British liberal philosopher John Stuart Mill said:

'The only part of the conduct of any one, for which he is amenable to society, is that which concerns others. In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.'

From this comes liberalism's view of the pre-eminence of the individual. Liberals have an optimistic view of people, not taking a naïve view of human nature or even wanting to change human nature, but optimistic about the ability of people to create institutions that can effectively protect people from oppression and make life better. It

encapsulates a belief in the potential of people to 'self-improve' however they choose that to mean, and therefore any pressure from the state, society or private sector entities for people to conform is rejected, unless the expression of individualism affects the personal freedoms of others.

Equality

The commitment to personal liberty does not mean there should be no constraints, but any constraints must treat everyone as being of equal human value. Liberals do not believe that, left to themselves, all humans would act well. The state is necessary to restrain and discourage those who would harm others. But the state's power must only be exercised within the limits of law, and the law should not permit oppression in the name of order. The state needs to step in to ensure the conditions for equality of citizenship. Poverty, unemployment, ill-health, disability and lack of education represent serious enough constraints on equality to justify state action to combat them. That is why liberals believe in a role for the state in providing education, social security, promotion of good health, etc, in order to guarantee equality of citizenship and opportunity. The liberal belief in freedom of expression means equality does not mean we all end up the same, and liberals are generally happy with differences in wealth and lifestyle as long as these cannot be used to buy privileged treatment under the law or to undermine the life chances of less privileged citizens.

Community

Liberalism's commitment to community stems from a belief in the benefits of decentralising political and economic power to communities. If the core tenet of liberalism involves opposition to the abuse and overconcentration of power – whether state, private, or social – it follows that power needs to be concentrated closer to where individuals live their lives. In reality, individuals almost never live alone; they function in a mixture of different communities, whether of family, neighbourhood, region, workplace or interest. These communities must not be disenfranchised by unnecessary power being concentrated in faraway centres like national capitals. Liberals believe that people gain great benefits from living in groups and communities (and can identify as being members of several communities at the same time), but they also believe that individuals should not be defined by such groups and communities. Promoting freedom from conformity is fundamental to liberal politics. For example, liberals approve of patriotism as a form of identifying with a community (a national community) but they oppose nationalism as a threat to liberty and prosperity. Showing some degree of preference for the interests of one's fellow citizens is understandable, but our common humanity is ultimately more important.

The common good

This is increasingly referred to as liberalism's commitment to the environment, in the sense that raw materials, clean air and water, and a manageable climate are all part of the common good. Thus the liberal believes that the common good should be available to everyone, yet must only be exploited within sustainable limits and thus be protected for the benefit of present and future generations. Liberty and equality are important for how we protect the environment. One reason liberals believe in

urgent action on climate change is that delay makes more likely the adoption in future decades of authoritarian policies. Equality is important to environmental policy because the burdens and benefits of tackling environmental threats should be shared fairly, not only domestically but also across the world.

Internationalism

Just as national laws should extend freedom for individuals, international systems and institutions should function to extend freedom for nations, and treat all nations alike. Free trade should be pursued, not just – or even mainly – for its economic benefits, but for its ability to bind nations together, building common interests in shared prosperity, forging transnational links between citizens which broaden the outlooks of both/all sides, and making conflict less likely. In an interdependent global economy, the need for international institutions such as the United Nations, the European Union and others is essential for practical reasons, as well as expanding the liberal belief in celebrating different ways of living.

Democracy

Liberalism's belief in equality and the pre-eminence of the individual means, of necessity, that a fair and functioning democracy is key. Democracy, when it works properly, promotes equality of citizenship (e.g. one person one vote, every vote counting regardless of where it is cast), while liberty and equality are necessary conditions of democracy. There is no such thing as an 'illiberal democracy'; a state that oppresses part of its population or which manipulates them, even with the consent of the majority, is not a democracy. Liberals believe that democratically elected governments are not immune from being oppressive; they too can accumulate too much power – but the liberal rejects simplistic notions such as 'the people are always pure' and 'politicians are always wicked'. As members of the political process, liberals want to get elected, but they accept they will not always be in power, and that when they are they may well have to find accommodations with other parties as part of a healthy democratic process.

What liberalism has achieved

All the major achievements of British liberalism over the centuries have been motivated by these core tenets:

- In the 17th century the Whigs fought to curb the power of the monarchy, for equality before the law, and for the rights of conscience, religion and thought.
- The 19th century Liberals initiated a series of political reforms, including extending the franchise, and dismantling barriers to participation in the civil service, the universities and the military.
- In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the 'New Liberals' developed the concept of social liberalism, in which the state took an active role in creating the conditions for equality. The Liberal governments of 1906-14 laid the ground for the welfare state (through pensions, national health insurance,

employment benefit, and other measures), and established British liberalism as a political philosophy with an intrinsic role for the state.

- In the 20th century the Liberals were the first of the major parties to campaign for the protection of the natural environment and the first to call for national progress to be judged in other ways than by a simple measurement of economic activity. It was a liberal, William Beveridge, who was the architect of the expanded welfare state enacted by the 1945-50 government, and Liberal Democrats including Paddy Ashdown and Robert Maclennan were instrumental in devolving power from Westminster to new assemblies in Edinburgh and Cardiff.
- In the 21st century it was a liberal initiative in coalition with the Conservatives that gave legal status to same-sex marriages.

Use, or abuse, of the word 'liberal'

The word 'liberal' has been used – perhaps even abused – to denote policies the British liberals would not consider liberal. In America the word is used to denote 'left-wing' in the US political system (often a synonym for 'Democrat'), while in Australia the Liberal Party are the conservatives. More significantly, 'liberal' is used in mainland Europe to describe parties that are low-regulation and business-friendly in outlook (such as the FDP in Germany or VVD in the Netherlands), while 'neoliberalism' came to be used as a term denoting low regulation *laissez faire* economics more akin to libertarianism than liberalism.

Since the late 19th century, British liberalism has had such a strong social element that support for free trade and light-touch economic regulation has only been part of liberal policy as long as social liberty, equality, community and protecting the common good have been fully respected.

Beware impostors claiming to be liberal!

What liberalism is not

Liberalism is so appealing as an ethos that plenty of people claim to be liberals who are far from it. It's therefore worth setting out what is *not* liberalism.

Liberalism is *not* ...

- Freedom without restriction – that is libertarianism, or even anarchy. This is where the British liberals diverge from some parties in mainland Europe and Australia that call themselves liberal but are primarily motivated by reducing restrictions for businesses.
- An ideology based on scapegoats and bogeymen. Liberalism is based on a fundamental, but not naïve, belief in the goodness of people. This distinguishes liberals from traditional right-wing parties, whose pessimistic view of human nature plays to people's fears and creates threats and enemies against which such parties can portray themselves as defenders of the status quo.
- An ideology based on power. Achieving power through the electoral process is a means to an end for the liberal rather than the end in itself. Up to a point, all parties say that, but liberalism fully expects that a liberal party will sometimes be out of power as a way of ensuring the fluidity of governance. While no liberal candidate will ever say he/she wants to lose an election, permanent power is not part of the liberal creed, and those who worship power cannot by definition be liberals. Liberals also see power as being held 'in trust', in other words for all of the people, both those alive now and those in the future.
- A philosophy based on economics or vested interest. For the liberal, the principal point about economics is its ability to act as an enabler; economics affects the distribution of power, and can therefore enlarge, or diminish, the life-chances of individuals. And because liberalism is focused on the individual, it does not represent the vested interests of a sectoral group in society, the way Labour has represented the industrial working classes and the Conservatives have represented landed and big money interests.
- Anti-patriotic, though it is against aggressive nationalism. The internationalist outlook of liberalism is sometimes interpreted as rejecting patriotism, but it is entirely consistent with being patriotic. Patriotism is that sense of community that people have when they come together to support a national entity, through sport, the arts, or even clapping for a much-loved national institution. But liberalism rejects the idea that, because we want our team to win, we must be the best country in the world if it does. And it also rejects the idea that

we have to be patriotic for one geographical area alone – liberals can be 'patriotic' for their village, town/city, district, county, British nation, the UK, or Europe, all at the same time if necessary.

Britain's original green party

The role of ecology in liberalism

Political parties in many countries, including the UK, have tried over the past 30 years to incorporate environmental elements into their policy programmes. The Liberals and Liberal Democrats didn't have to do this – because the environment was there anyway.

Liberalism's commitment to the common good means liberals have always viewed any damage to the environment as, in effect, damage to public property and the inheritance of future generations. This sits alongside liberalism's view that, as human life depends on the planet on which we live, it is absurd to act in a way that would sink the ship we all sail on.

Indeed the Liberal Party was Britain's original green party. Its *Yellow Book* in 1928 contained a strong defence of the countryside, advocating the establishment of National Parks. Following a comprehensive *Report on the Environment* in 1972, the Liberal Party manifesto at the February 1974 general election included a number of environmental pledges, which came years before the advent of environmentalism as a mainstream concern.

Under the heading 'The Quality of Life', the manifesto said:

'The damage to the fabric of society and the environment as a result of the pursuit of unlimited growth has been enormous. To the extent that growth has been achieved, it has not increased human happiness ... Whether or not continued expansion is desirable, we now have to ask if it is indefinitely feasible ... The resources of this planet are limited and we shall not be able to go on increasing consumption of energy, raw materials and foodstuffs at current rates.'

The manifesto called for 'controlled economic growth' and 'the careful husbandry of resources and the limitation of private consumption by the few in favour of better public services for the majority.'

It also rejected GDP as a reliable indicator of national well-being, a move that was further enhanced in 1979 when the Liberal Party assembly adopted a resolution declaring that 'economic growth, as measured by GDP, is neither desirable nor achievable'.

So when British liberals claim to have been calling for an urgent change of direction on the environment for 50-100 years, they have documentary evidence to prove it.

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Recovering from liberalism's post-Cold War battering

Liberalism and today's politics

In many ways, the rebuilding of the world's democracies in the years after the Second World War represented the triumph of liberalism. Most 'western' democracies involved a degree of liberty, equal rights under the law, and democratic rights. The West German model was a shining example of this, with its representation for employees on company boards, its federal structure with a constitutional court, and its proportional voting system.

But the economic hardships of the 1970s and 1980s led to a reduction in safeguards and a 'liberalisation' (often meaning dismantling) of structures across the 'western' world, such as the privatisation of industries and weakening of trade union rights. The monetarist movement personified by Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher and Helmut Kohl even spawned the term 'neoliberal' to denote a move back to the original liberal philosophy of removing obstacles to business, ignoring the social concerns of 19th century liberals.

The fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989-91 was supposed to represent the triumph of liberal values over excessive state control, yet over the subsequent 30 years, the core values of liberalism have taken something of a hit:

- Individual **liberty** has suffered at the hands of a centralised and surveillance state. There are inevitably issues of scale that have to be decided over a wide geographical area, and there is always a balance to be struck between personal liberty and the need for security that involves some surveillance. But the centralisation of power in London, alongside ubiquitous CCTV cameras, data selling and other features of modern life have undermined civil liberties.
- While most states pay lip service to the **equality** of all citizens, the practical reality has not kept pace. The UK is one of the least equal countries in the developed world – in terms of income and wealth equality – as a result of deliberate policy choices of Conservative governments, barely countered by Labour. The concentration of power in the hands of a small number of massive multi-national companies has exacerbated differences between the richest and poorest.
- The **communities** with which people identify have been threatened by social division and over-centralisation. Advocates of populist politics have sought to foment disharmony and raise barriers between communities which impede recognition of the fact that we are all members of different communities, thereby detracting from our common humanity.
- The growing awareness of the need to protect **ecology** that dates from the 1980s has not been reflected in action to tackle environmental issues, notably climate change, to the point where scientific opinion says the global

community now has less than ten years to make a serious attempt at addressing greenhouse gas emissions before it might be too late

- The concentration of traditional media in a few hands and the growth of social media has meant the principle of free-flowing and fair information that underpins **democracy** has been seriously undermined, to the point where any lie appears to be legitimate as long as the person speaking/writing it can get away with it.

With national economies having to adjust following the Covid-19 pandemic, it is vital that the core tenets of liberalism are included in any post-Covid restructuring, otherwise basic civil liberties and human rights will be lost, perhaps forever.

Liberalism in Britain

Liberalism has existed in Britain since the 17th century, but over the past four decades it has been largely watered down and ignored.

The Liberal Party was eclipsed by Labour as the primary alternative to Conservative governments in the first three decades of the 20th century, and it ended in the 1980s when it merged with the Social Democratic Party to form the Liberal Democrats, diluting residual liberalism as a force. No blame is attached to this – the dictates of the first-past-the-post voting system have meant that, since the war, the Liberal Democrats have often had to cash in on being a protest party more than a party with its own distinct platform. But it has meant the Lib Dems have been defined more in relation to other parties than by what they stand for.

This has brought benefits and disbenefits for the inheritors of the British liberal tradition. At one level the Lib Dems have profited from dissatisfaction, frequently picking up considerable support at council elections and peaking at nearly 10% of MPs after the 2005 general election. But at general elections they have tended to get squeezed as voters gravitate towards the parties that will provide the post-election Prime Minister.

On policy grounds, the essence of liberalism lends itself to less difficult cooperation with Labour, yet the Lib Dems' 2010-15 coalition with the Conservatives has left many progressives sceptical about the party's true beliefs, a scepticism encapsulated by the pejorative term 'Yellow Tories'. Despite this, the Lib Dems' value to the democratic cause is partly as a refuge for disaffected Conservatives who are willing to trust a centrist party but not vote for Labour. And there are many voters who don't identify with any party who have a tacit thirst for liberalism – people in urban centres and the commuter belt, diverse communities, graduates, business leaders and entrepreneurs, and those who trade with the rest of the world. Liberalism can be a refuge for many people who might otherwise be politically homeless.

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Liberalism and the state

The role of the state

Liberalism stands for the rights of the individual, and is therefore sceptical of the power of the state and unfettered free enterprise. Yet it believes in a role for the state, and for a reform of capitalism rather than an end to capitalism. So what role should the state play in a liberal society?

Capable – not big or small

The traditional political debate about the role of the state has centred on its size. Traditionally the 'left' has been in favour of a big state, while the 'right' has favoured a small state. Liberals believe in a *capable* state, able to respond to contemporary needs. Those needs will change over time, and what we looked to the state to do 40 or 50 years ago is different to what we seek from it now.

Challenges such as climate change, geopolitical tensions, ensuring big tech does not become ungovernable, terrorism, etc, have to be tackled by the state – in concert with other countries on a European and global level – but domestically the state essentially has two roles: to put limits on the free market, and to provide those services that the market would either not offer on its own or would offer less equitably than if provided by the state. Examples of where the state must play a central role in a modern-day liberal society are:

- Ensuring equality – the UK has one of the highest levels of inequality in the developed world, a situation that doesn't benefit even the richest as it undermines the social ties that hold society together. Globalised consumer capitalism is funnelling the fruits of everybody's labour into a few pockets; the liberal looks to the state for ways of funnelling wealth out again into the pockets both of those who have worked to generate it and to those who most need it. This will involve redistributing income and wealth through fairer taxation.
- Ensuring a fair start – liberals accept that differences between rich and poor will exist, but everyone should be given the opportunity to achieve what they are capable of, and that requires the state to provide an education system guaranteeing equality of opportunity to everyone: children and adults.
- Regulating the market – the state needs to constrain the use of corporate power and set minimum standards for labour rights, including rules for the observance of contracts in cases of dispute, and product standards, for example for health, safety and environmental impact. The tech and data sector will need regulating in order to harness technology for the common good. Markets should serve people, not the other way round.

- Tackling climate change and protecting our natural heritage – climate change is the biggest environmental threat because of its urgency and potential to threaten our ability to live, but it must not be allowed to drown out other ecological concerns. Our natural environment is part of the ‘common good’, and therefore we need to value it and ensure it remains an asset for future generations. Actions by the state must include ensuring Britain plays its full part in reducing greenhouse gases, as well as protecting valuable ecological sites such as ancient woodlands and areas of outstanding beauty, writing planning laws so they don’t create problems for the future, and reforestation and rewilding initiatives.
- Ensuring universal rights to health and social care – liberals believe that, for individuals to flourish, they must know that they can live a healthy life and have a backstop for medical needs. Much of the responsibility for health lies with the individual, but the state must provide both the foundations to live a healthy life and a national medical service free at the point of use. In theory one could leave it to the market, but we have seen that marketising health services leads to inequity, poorer outcomes, and wastage.
- Providing ‘common good’ services – all parties generally agree that the state must provide some ‘common good’ services, such as policing. Liberals are not naïve about human behaviour. They recognise that, left to their own devices, some people will not necessarily act in the common interest. But government and policing services must be fair and transparent, and while trade-offs between civil liberties and surveillance for legitimate security purposes are sometimes needed, the moment the state takes away more civil liberties than are strictly necessary, it encroaches into the territory of oppression.

What the state should stay out of

Although the state can be a useful tool in restraining and re-directing private power, it is also itself a source of danger to freedom and needs to be constrained by law. Among the areas it should stay out of are:

- Personal freedoms – how a person conducts their own life is no concern of the state unless it infringes the rights of others. For example, the state has no business in anyone’s sexual preferences, unless those preferences trample on someone else’s rights.
- Abusing personal information – the state can collect various aspects of personal data necessary to carrying out its agreed functions, but it must collect no more than is necessary, and it must not share this data with anyone who does not have a cast-iron need for it (eg. private companies looking to gain access to a wider market).
- Becoming overbearing – the state is justified in imposing broad requirements on business, but should be wary of imposing any more than are necessary. Unnecessary burdens on businesses, as on citizens, reduce scope and choice for those under the burden.

Given that minimalist regulation brought about the 2008 financial crash and has led to a laggardly approach to fighting climate change, an effective level of state intervention is crucial to a functioning society. However, in seeking a 'capable state', liberals do not see 'the state' to always mean 'the centre'; as many state functions as possible should be decentralised to regional and local levels.

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The best of Britain is still to come!

Towards a liberal manifesto

If liberalism is an optimistic creed, a liberal manifesto for a contemporary general election must address today's problems in a way that is guided by the core tenets of liberalism and produces a positive vision. If it is to compete with whatever three-word slogan the Conservatives come up with, it must be something that excites the public and voters can believe in. The success of Jacinda Ardern's government in New Zealand was not ideological but human – a vision of positivity, empathy, an absence of dogma and plenty of smiles. The message in some form should be that the best of Britain is still to come, and we will build it.

Any specific manifesto will be written according to the key needs and issues of the time, but it is nonetheless possible to set out a framework for the next UK general election.

Modernising Britain's governance

The establishment of updated systems of governance must be the cornerstone of a contemporary liberal manifesto, even if only the first steps can be taken in the lifetime of a single Parliament. A liberal manifesto should include commitments in the following areas:

- A proportional voting system for elections, at least for Westminster if not also for all council elections (the actual voting system could but doesn't need to be specified but must meet basic requirements of proportionality)
- Devolution of powers – with commensurate funding – to regions and local councils to make UK governance less London-centric, together with scope for bottom-up initiation in decision-making so not everything has to come from lawmakers
- Reform of the House of Lords, perhaps to include some regional representation along the lines of the Bundesrat in Germany
- A codified constitution with constitutional court
- The establishment of a federal United Kingdom, with appropriate representation for all four nations within the Union
- A restatement of the independence of the judiciary and the principle that the rule of law applies to everyone
- Ensuring an independent public service broadcaster with the freedom to criticise the government and the policies of government departments.

Replacing first-past-the-post with a proportional system is the only way of ensuring the liberal principle that everyone's voice must be heard.

The pursuit of liberty

Relative to many other countries, liberty is quite advanced in Britain, but it always needs defending. Indeed it is currently under threat from a government trying to weaken the courts, limit the power to protest, compromise electoral scrutiny, and remove any restraints on its actions. A liberal manifesto should include commitments in the following areas:

- Ensuring the rule of law applies to everyone, and eliminating scope for buying favourable treatment through money, influence or other favours
- Defending human rights
- Ensuring government goes no further than it needs to and does not encroach on the territory of personal freedom except to prevent one person's freedom infringing another's
- Ensuring the use of personal data can at all times be controlled by the individual except in cases where law and order concerns dictate otherwise
- Guaranteeing freedom of speech and access to public information except where there is a clear security interest in preventing this
- Ensuring the arts and culture enjoy a fair degree of encouragement and promotion, and are not seen as being of less value than science and technology
- Promoting mental health and valuing emotional intelligence.

Liberty and security are often seen as being in opposition to each other, and sometimes they are but often they aren't. Where there are difficulties, we need a robust and transparent system to ensure that measures to maximise the safety of citizens only compromise personal liberty in clear and defined circumstances.

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Liberty in speech, democracy and defence

Liberals believe in freedom of speech, democracy and the possibility that liberals can be wrong. But the principle that liberty stops at the point where it infringes the liberty of others applies in the defence of that freedom of speech and democracy. A liberal manifesto should feature commitments to:

- Ensuring freedom of speech stops at the point where it becomes abusive to others. The best mechanism for achieving this must protect freedom of speech but rule out abusive behaviour, both on the internet and in person.
- Ensuring that individuals and parties who advocate a form of governance that undermines democracy, for example by proposing the abolition of elections and parliaments/councils, have no formal role in the democratic process.
- A review of defence spending so Britain has adequate military defences to repel an attack from abroad that threatens our free speech and democracy.

Tackling inequality

This is where the state plays its most important role in ensuring a level playing field for individuals to have enough of a chance in life that they can make the most of their liberty. A liberal manifesto should include commitments in the following areas:

- Ensuring **healthcare** both by encouraging disease prevention through enabling healthy lifestyles and by maintaining a national medical service free at the point of use
- Offering a diverse and dynamic national **education** system that covers all the basics while encouraging different ways of learning; the most important stage for tackling inequality is early years education, but a liberal education policy must also cover all stages of the education process, including higher education and lifelong learning
- Preventing discrimination on the basis of **geography, background and ethnicity**, by addressing the situation whereby some people's life chances are vastly superior/inferior to others'
- Ensuring minimum levels of **income**, perhaps through a universal basic income, and reducing the scope for the richest in society to escape their social obligations
- Starting the process of **wealth redistribution**; our global economic system now facilitates the accumulation of extraordinary levels of wealth, yet much of it is currently beyond the reach of tax, thereby making the billionaires richer amid widespread poverty. The taxation of property, including council tax, is in urgent need of reform.
- Setting **limits to wage inequality**; tackling wage inequality must include recognising the value to society of all work, whether paid work (for example key workers) or unpaid work (eg. carers)
- A commitment to **diversity** through seeing everyone as people of equal value regardless of their gender/heritage/sexuality, and irrespective of any community they choose to identify with.

Some of these measures might have to come in the second phase of a liberal government once basic equality of opportunity and services have been established.

Promoting community

Many of the communities we belong to are not the concern of governments (family, street, workplace, sports/social club, political party, etc), but local, national and international communities are. And the encouragement of local communities and their initiatives is central to the liberal commitment to decentralising power. A liberal manifesto should include commitments in the following areas:

- A new settlement for local government, covering minimum levels of funding, a new approach to raising money for councils, and proportional representation for all local elections
- Devolution of powers from London, including a resolution of the 'English question' to ensure greater localism for England
- A pot of money to support community initiatives, such as local energy projects, cooperatives, employee share ownership and participation schemes, local banks, and other ideas
- Encouragement of the 'Preston model' of using public procurement to support local businesses and therefore create a local circular economy

- A beefing up of law and order, not through draconian sentencing, but through the return of visible community police officers to generate a sense of safety
- A review of schools governance, with a view to establishing a minimum level of local input (as opposed to distant academy trusts) to ensure schools fit in with their locality rather than provide one-size-fits-all education
- The creation of a role for civic or citizens' assemblies as a precursor to certain categories of legal decision-making
- Harnessing the digital revolution so it promotes and enhances community through being accessible to everyone, yet not assuming that being online caters for all needs of those who cannot leave their homes.

The interdependence of ecology, economy and growth

Ever since the environment became a political consideration in the late 1980s, there has been talk of the trade-off between economic and environmental considerations. The liberal does not recognise that trade-off, simply because what is not good ecologically cannot be good economically. That must be a fundamental principle of any liberal manifesto, which should include commitments in the following areas:

- Embarking on a plan for the UK to fulfil its minimum commitment to sharing the burden of tackling climate change with the appropriate urgency; such a commitment should include action to make it easier for countries in the developing world to play their part too as only a global effort stands any chance of success
- Changing the indexes by which national success is measured, basically replacing GDP and making more use of ecological, well-being and happiness indexes
- Setting the purpose of economic policy as being to generate the wealth to deliver political, social, environmental, and cultural objectives, without those objectives being undermined in the generation of that wealth
- A new approach to commerce that involves stakeholder capitalism and representation of workers on company boards to encourage a broader sense of industrial ownership
- Switching taxation from things we want to encourage to those we wish to discourage, for example reducing labour taxes but increasing taxes on polluting and climate-changing emissions, reducing taxes on recycling industries but increasing taxation on extraction of raw materials, etc.

In recent years, many have questioned the future of economic growth in the context of the imperative to tackle climate change, as the pursuit of economic growth is often thought of as synonymous with ever-increasing consumption of resources. Yet this is not the only way to improve productivity and prosperity. Improving the efficiency with which natural resources or energy are used, increasing the use of 'circular economy' approaches, maximising re-use and recycling, and replacing non-renewable with renewable energy (eg. wind power instead of fossil fuels) are much better ways to increase prosperity.

Addressing data and the tech revolution

The next 10 to 20 years will see a major shake-up of Britain's economy thanks to advances in technology, artificial intelligence and data, which will eradicate many traditional jobs and create some new ones. In many ways it will amount to a new industrial revolution, creating much uncertainty and pessimism. Liberalism can provide a sustainable, equitable and humane solution to managing this revolution and harnessing its power for the common good. A forward-looking liberal manifesto will include commitments on:

- Ensuring tech giants honour their obligations, pay their full tax, and do not become more powerful than governments; this can only happen in concert with our international partners, specifically the EU but also groupings that embrace countries on other continents, but the UK can make a start
- Setting out how technology, AI and data can be a force for equality by ensuring our school leavers are ready to play their part in this brave new technological world with the right training to maximise its opportunities
- Linking tech advances that lead to redundancies with measures to create new forms of income, even if such income is unrelated to the work done (eg. UBI), in order to preserve the dignity of work
- A framework for the use of technology in healthcare and education so we make full use of its opportunities without losing face-to-face contact.

Liberalism must provide the safeguards so the individual and the community are not left behind as advances in technology revolutionise the workplace and wider society.

Looking outwards

Liberalism is intrinsically outward-looking and embraces international cooperation, in fact many liberal beliefs cannot be enacted without sustained international cooperation (disarmament, tackling the power of tech giants, etc). The political mood music in the early years of Britain being outside the European Union will create problems of how policies are formulated, but the essence of liberalism requires us to commit to international cooperation, even if in some cases that proves unpopular. Therefore, a liberal manifesto should feature the following areas:

- A commitment to working closely and collaboratively with the EU; in the long term we believe the UK's future lies within the EU
- A statement of our commitment to working as part of other international organisations like the UN, WHO, Nato, etc, to facilitate multilateral solutions to cross-border challenges
- Re-establishing the pre-eminence of diplomacy as the primary tool of foreign policy, along with re-establishing trust in Britain as an honest broker
- Tackling the underlying causes of involuntary migration by working to address what prevents people being safe and secure where they live, often causing them to leave their homelands and seek refuge overseas
- Honouring Britain's minimum commitment to aid for the developing world, and possibly exceeding it after making the case that to do so is as much in our interest as that of those who benefit from such aid
- A renewed commitment to the European Convention on Human Rights
- Revitalising foreign language teaching in education

- Working out a pragmatic way of working with countries like China, Russia and others whose attitude to human rights we reject but with whom we need to cooperate to fight climate change, pandemics and international terrorism, without losing our ethics and integrity.

Thinking outside the box

The nature of liberalism is that it celebrates creativity and believes in the intrinsic good in people. Therefore, a true liberal manifesto would include some elements not considered standard in a manifesto, albeit not in a way that makes the state overbearing. A Ministry of Hope and Optimism would probably be too Orwellian, but any liberal manifesto should think outside the box. For example:

- A commitment to truth – this should not need stating, but in an era where putting out misinformation is considered legitimate if it serves a purpose, there must be a much greater assertion of the role of truth. This means a stricter monitoring regime for public information, as well as for social media without it compromising freedom of thought and expression. It must also cover Parliament, where untruths amount to an assault on the functioning of democracy. This might even be extended to a commitment to moderation, reason, decency, integrity and/or the pursuit of unity rather than divisiveness.
- Rethinking taxation – there is a view that ‘tax’ is bad, a punishment from faceless bureaucrats who enforce government policy. Liberals should encourage getting away from this negative approach and foster a view of tax as a financial contribution to enabling the state to do the jobs it needs to do and only it can do.
- Rethinking income – income has traditionally been related to work done, but automation will force us to reassess that, and once we get away from the idea that we have to be paid by the person or entity we work for, we open the door to schemes like universal basic income which, while still largely untried, will be necessary and productive in some form in the long term. What is important is for the dignity of work to be preserved, however that work is done or remunerated.
- Rethinking the generation of wealth – wealth is generated by everyone in a company or industry, yet we tend only to reward those who take entrepreneurial decisions. While those who take the risks are entitled to be rewarded within the context of their market value, the role of everyone who contributes to the generation of wealth must be recognised. The distribution of wealth is part of this.
- Recognising the value of parents and carers – as long as we have GDP as our indicator of national wealth, we should include the contribution of stay-at-home parents and carers in that measure of wealth.
- Education as a means to create effective citizens – the need for education to encourage the learning of basic skills and, later, specialist skills is taken as read, but education must also train people to be effective citizens. This involves teaching school students about government and society, and about their responsibilities as citizens as well as their rights, and their role in democracy.
- Rethinking Britain as an international state – there is nothing wrong with saying that Britain has a great past, as long as we tell the truth about the less

glorious side as well, and knowing where we have come from is a helpful tool towards feeling comfortable in a sense of national community. But we can also encourage the idea of Britain as a genuinely participatory state on today's international stage, not the land-grabbing aloof state it was in the era of empire.

- Recognising that the cultural and socio-psychological is as important to a self-respecting society as the economic; that emotional intelligence is as important as intellectual intelligence; that making mistakes is part of the drive towards best outcomes; and that U-turns can be a sign of strength rather than failure.
- Recognising that, while we believe in liberalism, we might be wrong, and we're very happy to have people constructively disagree with us!

A liberal manifesto has to be a beacon of hope, but the route to the promised land involves widespread and at times drastic changes. The liberal has to recognise that change must come at a pace people can work with if it is not to create its own set of new problems, and that respect must be given to those who may struggle with changing norms and lifestyles, even if the fears that come with those changing norms and lifestyles may not be borne out in reality.

Being a liberal is never finished

Liberalism never stops. Times change, technologies and external challenges come and go, but as long as there are interdependent societies, there will always be the need to ensure that the needs of every individual are paramount. Private and state bodies should serve the individual, not the other way round.

Liberalism offers a perfect alternative to the Conservatives for the next British general election, whether presented solely by the Liberal Democrats or as a framework for cross-party cooperation among socialists, social democrats, social liberals, greens, liberal conservatives and others. A new incarnation of liberalism could be exactly what those often labelled 'progressives' are looking for.

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The New Liberal Manifesto

Lead author:

Chris Bowers is a two-term Liberal Democrat district councillor, four-time UK parliamentary candidate and former European parliamentary candidate (and also a tennis commentator). He is known within the Lib Dems as a voice supporting cross-party cooperation, and in 2016 he co-edited 'The Alternative' (Biteback Publishing) with Caroline Lucas and Lisa Nandy, a collection of essays exploring common ground between Labour, the Lib Dems, Greens and others.

Members of the reference group:

Duncan Brack is a long-standing Liberal Democrat author and activist, member of the Federal Policy and Conference committees, a former special adviser in the Department for Energy and Climate Change, and editor of the Journal of Liberal History.

Monica Harding has worked as a CEO and director in the UK and internationally across government, charity and business sectors. She is the coordinator of The Britain Project, and was the Liberal Democrat parliamentary candidate in Esher & Walton in 2019

David Howarth is the former leader of Cambridge City Council, Liberal Democrat MP for Cambridge (2005-10), and an Electoral Commissioner, and is now a professor of law and public policy at Cambridge University.

Rob Parsons is a former lecturer in humanities at the Open University, and is now a Liberal Democrat local party activist.

It should be noted that the members of the reference group contributed to the shaping of this paper, but not all of them agreed with everything, some compromises were inevitably necessary, and therefore the individual members should not be considered to stand by every word in this document.

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The New Liberal Manifesto is an informal initiative by a group of Liberal Democrats, led by Chris Bowers of Ringmer, East Sussex, BN8 5LZ. Design by Nim Design of High Street, Harrow, HA1 3LP. Its primary mode of publication is online at www.newliberalmanifesto.org.uk. Any printed copies are produced on private printers, mostly with no knowledge of the lead author.