

Pocket Guide to Liberal Democrat Policies

November 2008

"It's time for real change in Britain. Families are struggling and the economy is in a mess. Only the Liberal Democrats have the fresh ideas you need.

We're offering real solutions to the problems you face every day. Lower taxes for ordinary families, a green future for your children, and public services we can all be proud of. Together we can make it happen."

Nick Clegg

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 November 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.

Compiled and produced by:

Liberal Democrat Policy & Research Unit
Liberal Democrats
4 Cowley Street
London
SW1P 3NB



CONTENTS

Economy	4
Environment and Energy	5
Health	6
Education	7
Local Communities	8
Business and Enterprise	9
Government and Civil Liberties	10
Foreign Affairs, Defence and International Development	11
Law and Order	13
Pensions and Benefits	14
Rural Affairs	15
Transport	16
Arts and Culture	17

ECONOMY

It's time to sort out the economy, and help people through the difficult times ahead. This government's spent more and more of your money and still failed the people who are most hard up. Liberal Democrats will get wasteful government spending under control and give the economy a boost by cutting taxes from the bottom up – ordinary families first.

Restoring confidence – Things look bad for the economy. The Government has let things go wrong, allowing banks to lend out too much money and letting house prices get out of control. We will strengthen the economy by making the Bank of England take house prices into account when setting interest rates and regulating banks properly. We will make sure the public finances never get in such a mess again with independent auditing of spending rules. We will 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 will 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.

Cutting taxes for ordinary families - We will take the pressure off ordinary families who still pay more of their income out in tax than the richest people in the country. We will tax income less and pollution more. We will abolish Council Tax and replace it with a tax based on the ability to pay. We will increase environmental taxes, limit tax relief on pension contributions to the basic rate, and reform residential stamp duty. Inheritance tax will be reformed and gains made by non-residents on property situated in the UK brought within Capital Gains Tax.

Saving to spend – We will reallocate £20 billion 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.

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.

ENVIRONMENT AND ENERGY

Climate change could destroy our way of life, but going green seems harder than ever. Instead of listening, and helping, the government piles on more taxes. Liberal Democrats will cut income tax and make polluters pay instead. We'll force energy companies to use windfall profits to cut your bills and help you use energy more efficiently.

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% 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 – We will provide leadership for an international framework that will enable each country to manage a transition to a low-carbon economy, including working for agreement on a more ambitious set of targets in the negotiations for the second commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol and beyond. We will help developing countries to mitigate and adapt to climate change, including working for the establishment of an International Leapfrog Fund to invest in low-carbon technologies, energy efficiency and renewable energy technologies in developing countries.

Sustainable Housing - We will aim to set national targets to reduce carbon dioxide emissions from the UK's housing by 80% 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 - We 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.

HEALTH

We're all proud of the NHS, but with superbugs, long waiting lists, and a postcode lottery for vital drugs – it still lets too many of us down. Liberal Democrats will put doctors, nurses and patients back in control. There'll be guaranteed care for elderly people. And the NHS will pay for you to go private if they can't deliver your treatment on time.

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 and review prescription charges.

Introduce a patient contract – We will guarantee every citizen access to a high standard of core healthcare entitlements within maximum waiting times. To make sure that the NHS delivers, patients will 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 will lead to shorter waiting times, cleaner hospitals and more personalised care.

Keeping people healthy, tackling Health Inequalities – We will give people the information and opportunities to make healthy choices, for example through clearer food and alcohol labelling. We will tackle the wider problems contributing to health inequality such as poverty, poor housing and poor environment.

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 good oral health.

EDUCATION

Every child needs a good school, but there are so many tests, and so much paperwork and regulations, children don't get the personal support they need. Liberal Democrats will raise standards, giving extra help to children who fall behind. And we'll make college and university affordable for everyone so no child's left behind.

Pupil Premium - We will help break the link between social background and education achievement with a new £2.5bn Pupil Premium, giving extra money to pupils from the most challenging backgrounds. This will increase the per pupil funding of a million pupils to private school levels and schools will be able to use this additional investment to cut class sizes and pay for extra tuition. Instead of wasting money on endless gimmicks that produce headlines but not real solutions we will deliver extra cash directly to the front line

Set schools free, stop Government meddling - Too much of what goes on in schools is determined by Government micro-management. We will give extra freedoms to all schools, in order to help them to drive up standards. We want to encourage school leaders to develop their own local solutions to the challenges which they face. Greater freedom to innovate will help to encourage more high quality school leadership, new sources of school governance, and more excellent teachers.

The Diploma - Instead of a complex and confusing qualification system, we need a framework which stretches the most talented, bridges the gap between vocational and academic and is understood by parents, pupils and employers alike. We will create a General diploma which will use GCSEs and A-Levels as building blocks and enable pupils to mix quality vocational and academic learning.

Education Standards Authority - A fully independent watchdog would safeguard the curriculum from political interference and ensure high standards across the education system.

LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Post offices, parks and neighbourhood shops are disappearing. Families get broken up as people move around more. And many people from around the world are making their home in Britain. We need stronger communities to bring people together again. We will help people come together to run services, fight crime and protect post offices, shops and homes.

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 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. 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.

Strong communities needn’t cost the earth – We will aim to reduce carbon emissions from the UK’s housing by more than 80% 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.

BUSINESS AND ENTERPRISE

We want to cut the red tape that stops businesses from growing. We'll protect everyone from rip-offs by introducing a new legal duty on business to trade fairly.

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 a substantial amount 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. We are currently working on a review and consultation on UK consumer policy which will report next year.

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 free Royal Mail to invest £2 billion for real investment and secure the future of the post office network.

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 – We will create real incentives for businesses and individuals to go green. Through our green tax switch and 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.

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. This scandal must stop.

GOVERNMENT & CIVIL LIBERTIES

Your privacy's being undermined. There are plans for intrusive ID cards, and the Government snoops into our lives and keeps losing private information. Liberal Democrats will stop identity cards and use the money to pay for more police. We'll introduce a Freedom Law to protect your privacy.

The way Britain is run means the Government doesn't have to listen to you – one party can get control over Parliament even if only a quarter of people support them. Liberal Democrats will stop MPs from fiddling expenses – and stop big donations too. We'll give you a fair voting system so everyone's opinion counts equally.

For the people, by the people – We will involve the British people in producing a written constitution. This would reform and reinvigorate the democratic process, putting individuals back in control. We will simplify the system for petitioning Parliament and ensure petitions are considered and acted upon. We will 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 local people are making the decisions that will affect their communities. 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.

INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

We will put British values into foreign policy - fairness, democracy and the value of human life. We'll put Britain at the heart of Europe so we're a stronger force for good in the world.

Our Armed forces have had to put up with sub-standard housing, are sent into conflict without proper equipment, and are stretched to the limit. The men and women of our Armed Forces must be properly valued. We'll make forces welfare a priority and equip our armed forces properly for the tasks of the future.

Ensuring Britain's security – Britain should work in cooperation with other states and international bodies and respond to radical ideologies with a firm defence of democratic values combined with a willingness to engage in dialogue. We believe that preventing conflict occurring is far preferable to intervention when crises have already emerged. We support the Responsibility to Protect principle - intervention for humanitarian reasons involving wide international participation under UN authority with achievable aims and a clear and realistic exit strategy.

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 we will be able to invest more in protecting the welfare of our forces, ensuring they are well-trained and well-equipped.

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.

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 aid spending to 0.7% of gross national income by 2011 at the latest.

LAW AND ORDER

Britain isn't safe enough. Our prisons are bursting, town centres can be no-go areas at night, and we have real problems with drugs and alcohol.

Liberal Democrats will create community justice panels to give you a say in how offenders pay for their crimes. We'll cut red tape for the police, and prisoners will work to pay for victim compensation. We'll fix our immigration system with proper border checks, and help newcomers learn English.

Together we can cut crime – We will put 10,000 more police officers on the street paid for by scrapping the ID card scheme. We will make police forces accountable to elected authorities, which are able to defend local priorities, set budgets and vary taxes where necessary. 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 through visible community sentences.

Make Prison Work for Victims - 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. 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 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.

PENSIONS AND BENEFITS

The current pension system is unfair; the basic state pension is too low and it discriminates against women and carers who take time out of work. 2.1 million pensioners live in poverty in the UK today and 2 out of 3 of pensioners are forced to claim benefits to make ends meet. We will immediately restore the earnings link to the state pension so that pensioners share in the growing wealth of the nation

We want to help people get and keep jobs that can give them a decent standard of living, as well as ensuring that no-one already in work lives in poverty. We will reform Tax Credits to end the unpredictability of the system which has left millions of families struggling to make repayments for the Government's mistakes.

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 within 2 parliaments that is set at a more generous level and based on residency not outdated National Insurance contributions which penalises women and carers disproportionately. 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 which cause repeated over and under-payments. This will end the uncertainty that this causes for millions of families each year.

Reform back to work support for the unemployed – 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.

Fuel poverty, green solutions – 5 million and rising households live in fuel poverty – that is, they have to spend 10% of their income on heating. 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 and increasing social tariffs.

RURAL AFFAIRS

The Liberal Democrats are the only party with the vision, commitment and political drive to deliver positive change which will in turn safe guard the future of our rural communities.

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 and 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.

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 Obligation, a new assurance scheme to ensure bioenergy is sustainably produced and transported, and reform of existing woodland tax breaks.

TRANSPORT

The transport system should help individuals to make green choices about the way they live offering modern, affordable, accessible and reliable means of travel. We would invest in a proper public transport system, taxing lorries and domestic flights in order to provide substantial new investment in the rail network to create the 21st century rail network our children and grandchildren need. The failed deregulation of the bus industry must be reversed. We will give local authorities much more control over the pricing and planning of services to create a viable local transport system.

A modern, viable, accessible transport system – We believe people have a right to safe, reliable and affordable transport choices wherever they live. We will build a national rail network fit for the demands of modern Britain, including commencing a priority programme for high speed rail and introducing a rolling programme of rail expansion schemes in local areas including opening new lines. We will support local communities and localised transport by enhancing the powers of Integrated Transport Authorities and local authorities to control bus matters.

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 major new programmes of road building and would invest in public transport instead. 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. A revenue-neutral motorways and trunk roads pricing system would replace Vehicle Excise Duty and lower harmful motor emissions.

Sustainable methods of moving freight – We will ensure good rail paths on key strategic freight corridors, facilitate the maximum use of inland and coastal waterways and encourage research and development into low-carbon technologies for freight vehicles.

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. We 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 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

Britain's rich heritage has a major impact on the quality of our communities and provides many of the most fulfilling moments in our lives. We believe that everybody should have the opportunity to participate in and enjoy a diverse range of cultural and sporting experiences. We will increase funding to community sports and help to improve the health of the whole nation. We will secure arts and heritage by restoring the independence of National Lottery funds. We will also ensure that public service broadcasting remains strong, free from interference and securely funded.

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 in museums and galleries and 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 investment 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.