

The Liberal Vision of Europe - A Commonwealth of Europe

The Liberal Party European Election Manifesto 1999

The Liberal Party...

- Wishes to create a democratic and diverse Commonwealth of Europe by withdrawal from, and replacement of, the present EU.
- Opposes The Maastricht Treaty.
- Opposes the Single European Currency and standardisation of taxes.

Seeks to increase power to the voters of Great Britain, not reduce it (for the first time in our history), which the Cons, Lab and Lib Dems have supported.

The Problem

The Liberal Party has a long history of support for European Unity. Unfortunately the European Union, we now see being constructed, is not the Liberal vision but a centralised and undemocratic super-state.

The corruption, fraud, and soaring personal and administrative expenses, together with the lack of adequate supervision of the commissioners (despite their forced resignation), are all symptomatic of an organisation deficient in democratically accountable structures

The weakness of the parliament allows our, and other governments', ministers to make decisions, hidden by or blamed on EU bureaucracy.

Making matters worse the Cons, Lab and Lib Dems, have all supported a new voting system which takes power away from the voters and puts it in the hands of the political parties.

We are alarmed at the prospect of a single European currency, which we believe to be undesirable and probably unworkable.

Unlike Cons, Lab and Lib Dems, the Liberal Party opposed the Maastricht Treaty and believes that withdrawal from the EU is preferable to the present illiberal structure. If elected, Liberal Party MEPs will promote the policies in this Manifesto and make the case for a different kind of European unity - a Commonwealth of Europe.

The Liberal Alternative

We work with others throughout Europe to replace the EU with a "Commonwealth of Europe" which would not include moves towards a single economy. We would therefore be able to welcome all the nations of Europe into membership at an early date, including the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe.

Priorities for a Commonwealth of Europe would be a guarantee of human rights, a real commitment to take into account the needs of poorer nations, action to clean up the environment, the development of alternative sources of energy and peacemaking. We also see animal welfare as a key area for action at a European level.

Liberals believe that many functions should be devolved from Westminster to the nations and regions, which make up the UK. Eventually it could be those nations and regions that form the basic building blocks of the structure, rather than the existing states.

At the heart of all our policies is the philosophy of liberalism. The essence of liberalism is that freedom is paramount, for experience shows that where freedom is lost, equality will soon not exist either. The Liberal concept of freedom is a broad one and we are committed to democracy, civil liberties and the spreading of wealth and power.

Democracy

Key Liberal policies

- The Parliament should appoint the Commission.
- The Parliament should be the main decision making body with the power to amend legislation.
- The Single Transferable Vote electoral system, as is being used in Northern Ireland, should be extended to the whole of UK.

The day to day running of the EU is in the hands of the Commission, which also initiates (but does not decide) EU legislation in the form of "directives". Commissioners are appointees of the governments of the member states and the Commission is not under the control of the European Parliament, although some small steps in this direction were taken in the Maastricht Treaty.

The final decisions on new legislation in the EU are not made by the European Parliament but by the Council of Ministers. This is composed of one minister sent by the government of each member state. The minister sent depends on the topic of discussion. The Prime Ministers meet twice a year.

The European Parliament can veto some types of legislation but cannot insist on amendments except by threatening to veto the whole proposal.

The Economic and Social Committee (composed of representatives of employers organisations, trade unions and other interest groups) and the Committee of the Regions (composed of representatives from the regional and local authorities within each state) fulfil a useful role, but they should report to the Parliament rather than being consulted separately as at present.

The Liberal Party is strongly opposed to the party list system being used at these elections. We advocate the use of the Single Transferable Vote in multi-member constituencies (as used in N Ireland), which empowers voters by allowing them to choose between different candidates of the same party.

Peace

Key Liberal policies

- Abandonment of nuclear and other weapons of indiscriminate destruction such as aerial bombardment.
- An end to the arms trade.
- Transfer of commitment and resources from military to non-military methods of resolving conflict.

The best means of achieving collective security is by working with other countries, reaching agreements by negotiation and using military force only as a last resort. To this end we believe that the United Nations needs to be reformed and strengthened.

The resolution of the conflict over Kosovo has always depended on a broadly based international peace keeping mission, and not on aerial bombardment.

We advocate the abandonment by the UK of nuclear weapons and other weapons of indiscriminate destruction. The UK should maintain sufficient conventional forces to defend its legitimate interests, to contribute to international peacekeeping missions and to counter terrorism.

Liberals seek a more flexible and open-minded approach to security and advocate a transfer of political commitment and money from military to non-military security. This should include mediation, monitoring and reconciliation work in areas of actual or potential conflict and more study of the causes and resolution of conflict.

A Single European Economy?

Key Liberal policies:

- Rejection of the single currency as impractical and dangerous.
- Amendments to the application process to make access to EU grants quicker and easier, especially for small businesses.
- Stricter measures to limit monopolies and to monitor the activities of multinational companies.

The Euro is now a reality and we anticipate increasing pressure on the UK to join Euroland. In theory this has only proceeded for those countries whose economies have "converged" in terms of inflation rates, exchange rates and interest rates but we remain concerned that the stability criteria have been met by fiscal engineering and that the system may yet collapse as did the ERM in 1992.

In order to administer the single currency the European Central Bank controls monetary policy with the primary objective of low inflation. This means that the government of each state involved loses control of its own money supply. The ultimate plan is for the whole of Europe to function as a single economy. Liberals warn of the dangers of going down this path and the possible consequences in terms of unemployment.

The Social Chapter

This involves agreement by all the member states, except the UK, to minimum requirements in relation to working conditions, consultation of workers and equality between the sexes. Matters relating to pay and the right to strike are specifically excluded.

Liberals accept the need for such legislation. We do not accept the view that low wages and poor social protection will help to reduce unemployment.

The EU Budget

Almost half of EU expenditure is on the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), of which UK farmers receive only a small share, and a quarter is on the various grants, out of which the UK has done rather better. Although it would be unrealistic to adopt the attitude that each state's contributions and benefits should balance, it is clear that the huge cost of the CAP distorts the whole budget.

Some of the largest grants are those intended to help redress the regional imbalances in the EU and have tended to concentrate on large infrastructure projects. The other funds are often badly publicised, bureaucratic and slow. Many examples of waste and fraud have emerged.

EU funds play a significant role in the UK economy, stimulating investment and generating employment. It is vital that the systems are improved and waste eliminated.

Monopolies and Multinationals

The EU has largely failed to address the issue of large multinational companies and their avoidance of democratic oversight. There have been instances of different regions of the EU bidding against each other in offering incentives to attract foreign companies seeking a presence in the single market. The potential for the emergence of trans-European monopolies is also very real.

Liberals regret that the UK Government has blocked proposals to give employees of large companies a right to be consulted about major strategic decisions including take-overs and mergers.

The Environment

Key Liberal policies

- The establishment of a “pollution police force”.
- A “green audit” of all EU policy and practice.
- A comprehensive research programme into alternative sources of energy.
- More extensive “eco-labelling” of products to help consumers to make informed choices.

Despite the strong public support for action on the environment at European level, progress has been slow. Liberals believe that combating pollution should be a high priority for the EU and this should include a serious commitment to assist the clean-up operations needed throughout Europe.

The principles are clear: pollution should be stopped at its source, preventive action should be taken wherever possible and the polluter should pay. These principles are rightly written into the Maastricht Treaty but action depends on proposals from the Commission. An opportunity has been missed to give the European Parliament power to raise specific instances of violations and to set up a monitoring system.

We therefore propose the establishment of a "pollution police force" with powers to investigate actual and potential sources of pollution, to prosecute polluters and initiate research. Liberals also advocate a "green audit" of all EU policy and practices.

The whole of Europe is dependent on non-renewable resources, especially oil. This means that its future depends on the development of alternative energy sources. EU policy statements recognise this but there is little commitment of action or resources.

Agriculture and Fishing

Key Liberal policies

- Replacement of the Common Agricultural Policy by a simpler and cheaper scheme to subsidise organic farming and encourage less intensive methods.
- Reform of the Common Fisheries Policy with a system based on fishing zones. Larger minimum mesh sizes and the banning of long drift nets.
- Encouragement of greater diversity of consumption and more research into fish stocks.
- A European Centre for agriculture and fisheries education and research.

The basic aim of the Common Agricultural Policy is to ensure that the EU is self sufficient in food. To achieve this there is a complex network of subsidies and quotas, which supposedly protect farmers by guaranteeing prices.

The results have been disastrous: a high cost to European taxpayers; significant fraud; distortions in agricultural markets with farmers growing crops for subsidies rather than to meet real demand; higher food prices for the consumer; food mountains and wine lakes and the sale of EU surpluses at knock-down prices providing unfair competition to some of the poorest nations in the world.

As the experience in Eastern Europe amply demonstrated, central planning on this scale rarely works. Various reform plans have reduced food surpluses but the cost to the taxpayer is still too high.

We are conscious of the problems caused to farmers in the past by sudden changes of policy and believe that further reform, though necessary, should be gradual and introduced with adequate notice and consultation. We are also alarmed at recent EU policy developments that constrain the ability of member states to restrict the products of certain practices, such as genetically modified food.

The Common Fisheries Policy has destroyed the livelihoods of thousands of fishermen. The aim of conserving fish stocks is right, but is not being achieved. The attempts by a central authority to set quotas for the whole of Europe highlights again the problems of remote decision-making.

Animal Welfare

Key Liberal policies

- Implementation of at least the standards in the Brambell Report on farming methods.
- Stricter controls over the transport of animals and a complete ban on the export of live animals for slaughter.
- The phasing out of laboratory experiments on live animals.

Liberals have a long-standing commitment to improve the treatment of animals. We see the transport of animals as a particular area for action by the EU.

Liberals are particularly concerned that EU standard setting should not follow a “lowest common denominator” approach and that member states should be allowed to adopt higher standards than the EU minimum. Although artificial quality standards can be used as a form of trade barrier, this is no reason to restrain states from enforcing genuine best practices.

Although some progress has been made by the EU in issuing new standards for the treatment of animals, enforcement is often lacking. We would also like to see a formal statement on the status of animals to counter the tendency to treat them as “products”.

Transport

Key Liberal policies

- The Common Transport Policy to emphasise environmentally friendly methods of transport.
- Scrap plans for a Trans-European Road Network and work to re-establish canal and rail networks.
- EU transport policy to incorporate Europe-wide minimum standards of air quality.

Liberal Party policy is to reduce the need for travel by encouraging less centralised economic development. Our aim is to reduce dependence on the motor car and we advocate a range of measures to promote more environmentally friendly methods of travel such as rail, water, bus, cycling and walking.

We recognise that measures to penalise motorists are unfair, especially to rural areas

unless adequate alternatives are available. Investment in public transport is therefore vital.

We support initiatives to reduce the need for travel, such as home shopping and teleworking.

Overseas Development

Key Liberal policies

- An EU joint aid programme at a level sufficient to bring the EU as a whole up to the UN target.
- A Commission investigation into the impact on poorer countries of all EU policies.
- Reform of the World Trade Organisation to take proper account of the needs of poorer countries.

Thirty years ago the United Nations calculated that aid from the countries of Europe and North America needed to be 0.7% of their GNP just to stop the gap in wealth from widening. This was set as a target but has never been met by the UK (nor by most other members of the EU).

Although aid is important the prospects for the poorer countries of the world depend on the terms of international trade. The World Trade Organisation should be changed to take proper account of the needs of the poorer countries of the world.

Measures are also needed to reduce the burden of debt on poor countries and this is another area where progress has been far too slow.

In Conclusion

The Liberal Party is fulfilling a function that would otherwise be missing from British politics.

With hard work we have found it possible to win at local level. In fact there are more Liberal councillors than Greens. Even in large urban wards the techniques of “community politics” can put local issues back into local politics.

We contest elections at national level in order to put neglected issues and ideas onto the political agenda. Every vote for the Liberal Party helps to get attention for the ideas set out in this manifesto.