

Constitutional Reform

Liberal Democrat Policy Briefing 22

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When Labour came to power in 1997, there were hopes that it would deliver a comprehensive package of constitutional reform. There has been some progress: a Scottish Parliament; devolution of some, but not enough, power to Wales and a new London Authority; a form of proportional representation for the European elections, Scotland, Wales and London; and a Freedom of Information Act. However, in crucial areas Labour has fallen short – in particular it has failed to deliver the promised referendum electoral reform for the Westminster Parliament, and Lords reform. The gap between government and the governed is still too great. Public bodies are not sufficiently accountable. Voters do not have a strong enough voice or enough choice. No wonder that more and more people feel alienated from politics.

Fair Votes

Democracy is the guarantee of all our freedoms, but the state of British democracy still leaves much to be desired. Liberal Democrats want to make government the true servant of the people, and we will develop a political process in which all voices can be heard. Liberal Democrats in government in Scotland have already introduced the Single Transferable Vote (STV) system for local elections, so local councillors genuinely represent their community. We would aim to:

- **Extend fair voting** to all local elections in Britain, and we will give the British people the chance to bring in electoral reform for the House of Commons through the referendum which Labour promised, but never delivered. We will review the European electoral system so people choose their MEPs, not just a party list.
- **Introduce the right to vote and stand for election at 16**, the stage in life at which people are able to begin full-time work and pay taxes. We will promote the action and habit of participation earlier in life through citizenship education and school councils.

Reforming the Commons

We would:

- Improve the quality of legislation through more systematic consultation, better timetabling and tougher scrutiny of secondary and European legislation.
- Improve the scrutiny of government finance by enabling the Commons to debate the Government's expenditure plans and vote on the options.
- Support more family friendly and efficient working practices for Parliament to bring a wider range of people, particularly women, into Parliament.
- Aim to reduce the number of MPs to around 450.

Reforming the Lords

We would:

- **Transform the House of Lords into a predominantly elected Second Chamber**, with representatives from the nations and regions of the UK. The Second Chamber should have enhanced functions in scrutinising delegated legislation and European directives and regulations.

Better Government in the Nations of the UK

Liberal Democrats have led the way in arguing for devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. We believe that people in those parts of the UK are better at making decisions on issues that affect them directly than is the government in London. We will:

- **Strengthen the powers** of the National Assembly for Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly.
- **Examine how to extend the role** of the Scottish Parliament in consultation with the Scottish Executive.

Cutting Back Central Government

The central government is too top-heavy, and in recent decades, the Prime Minister has exercised a growing domination over the political system which we believe should be curbed. We will:

- **Cut the excessive number of government departments**, and reduce the unnecessary number of government ministers – cutting 40 from the current total of 112. We will also move government bureaucracy out of London, saving money on office rents. Wealth and jobs will be spread more equally through the UK, by ending Britain's over-centralisation.
- **Cut back the Prime Minister's powers** of patronage, in particular appointments to the House of Lords; make the Royal Prerogative powers which the Prime Minister exercises, such as decisions of war and peace, subject to Parliamentary accountability; introduce a Civil Service Act as a barrier to politicisation of the civil service; and strengthen the powers of Parliament to scrutinise the actions of the executive.

Safeguarding Basic Rights

We would:

- **Strengthen the fight against discrimination with a single Equality Act**. This will outlaw all unfair discrimination, including on the grounds of race, sex, religion or belief, sexual orientation, disability, age or gender identity, and ensure equal protection for all.
- **Separate Church and State**. We will support the disestablishment of the Church of England to end political interference in the Church.
- **Develop a written constitution for the UK** in order to define and protect the constitutional freedoms our policies are designed to achieve.

This briefing contains Federal Liberal Democrat policies. The policies of the Scottish and Welsh Liberal Democrats and the Northern Ireland Local party apply on issues which are their responsibility within our Federal policy-making structure.

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