

# Rebuilding Trade and Cooperation with Europe

Hardly a week goes by without some new evidence of the damage done by Brexit to the British economy. From rising food prices, to empty supermarket shelves, to shortages of HGV drivers and of staff in the healthcare, farming and hospitality sectors, to musicians being unable to perform abroad, to British firms, farmers and fishers facing such higher charges and bureaucracy that they give up exporting their products altogether, to scientists losing chances of collaborative projects, Brexit is affecting more and more parts of everyday life. The coronavirus pandemic has caused the biggest shock to the British economy since the war, but, as the independent Office for Budget Responsibility has predicted, the impact of Brexit will be twice as large – and, unlike the pandemic, it will not stop.

The damage is not only to the economy. Brexit has removed British citizens' opportunities to work, to be together with their loved ones, to study and retire anywhere in the EU. Britain now has less clout in international negotiations, whether on climate change or biodiversity or trade. The existence of the UK itself is now under threat, as Brexit has weakened the arguments for Scotland and Northern Ireland – which both voted to Remain – to stay part of the union. The slogan 'take back control' was a lie; in reality Britain now exercises less control over the forces that determine its future than it did inside the EU.

Increasingly the electorate shares our view that Brexit is damaging Britain, and recognises that a new approach would bring benefits. The Liberal Democrat position, as agreed by conference in autumn 2020 and spring 2021, is to back the ultimate goal of the UK joining the EU once more. But support for a campaign to join the EU as soon as possible is by no means certain, and has no guarantee of success. In any case, there is no indication that the EU would want the UK back, in its current state; the Conservatives have gone out of their way to turn down offers of cooperation, to destroy the trust that is necessary to effective international relations and to diverge as much as possible from European standards and systems. The EU no longer sees Britain as a good neighbour, and it will take time to convince EU member states that the UK is serious about forging stronger links and rebuilding the relationship.

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# What Liberal Democrats believe

## Our principles and values

'The Liberal Democrats exist to build and safeguard a fair, free and open society, in which we seek to balance the fundamental values of liberty, equality and community, and in which no one shall be enslaved by poverty, ignorance or conformity.'

These words, from the preamble to [the Liberal Democrat party constitution](#), are written on every party member's membership card. They are the best short description of the party's principles and values – its philosophy. But clearly, they need expanding and explaining, particularly given that so much in Britain and the world has changed so radically in recent years.

We believe the party's core values can be described as liberty, equality, democracy, community, internationalism and environmentalism.

## Liberty

Liberal Democrats trust individuals to make their own decisions about how they live their lives, as long as they do not cause harm to others; no one else has the right to do this for them. We are optimistic about what individuals can achieve when not held back by the barriers of poverty, poor health, lack of access to education or inequality. Our predecessors in the Liberal Party had a proud record, stretching over centuries, of removing barriers to freedom erected on the basis of religion, belief, gender, sexuality or disability, and we will always defend the legal framework of human rights and civil liberties that protect individual freedoms.

An open, diverse and tolerant society is a good society. Being liberal necessitates being open-minded, and understanding that there will always be a range of different views on most issues. We embrace freedom of thought and speech, and argue for stronger protection against those who abuse free speech, use it to promote division and hatred, or spread falsehoods and 'fake news'.

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## Knock on more doors

Our major item of business was a **detailed discussion with Ed Davey about our messaging.**

'Partygate' is currently on the minds of the public and how we discuss decency in politics with voters was a topic of discussion. It is **sadly unsurprising that since our meeting, indecent rhetoric from our Prime Minister should be centre stage.**

That said, as a campaigning force we must not allow Prime Minister Johnson (PM at time of writing at least) to determine our message, and we must remember that **the public want a positive voice as well as a critical one.**

In the coming months, especially with **May local elections in mind**, we need to be **knocking on more doors** and talking about the **cost-of-living crisis, education, health and care, the environment (not just climate change) and the economy.**

Our thanks for the hard work of the Federal Policy Committee to make sure we have credible, progressive, costed policies to take to the public. We will continue to discuss with, and where necessary challenge, Ed his approach to our messaging.

## **North Shropshire**

**We are incredibly thankful to everyone who made North Shropshire possible.**

Two by-election victories in one year is an incredible feat, and I think we have all noticed a shift in public and media perceptions of what we are capable of. We must continue to be bold, and be [creative with our imagery](#).

The Committee received useful briefings on our approach to and lessons learned from North Shropshire. We are running better coordinated, vibrant campaigns but there is still work to do. As ever, **we won because we worked hard** as well as clever. **Winning in May and beyond will require more effort across the board.**

We are **grateful to all the members who have kicked off January with our largest ever doorstepping campaign**, and we look forward to seeing more colleagues joining them in February.

In North Shropshire there had been **strong slates of local candidates and successful local government advances that enabled us to establish ourselves as the only opposition.** It is important that we all learn from this example.

## **Candidate selections**

We exist to fight and win elections to get more Liberal Democrats elected and change the country. To do that, we need candidates.

In our latest meeting we edited and agreed, having **consulted with the State Candidate Chairs**, Terms of Reference for a **review into our candidates process**: from attracting talent, to approval, to selection. This will be **helmed by Tim Farron and Baroness (Alison) Suttie.**

We look forward to the report and its holistic approach to matching our needs and resources.

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## [Getting it right on Europe, how we run the party and on local candidates](#)

### **The next steps in our European policy**

There's a lesson we should learn from Brexiters. It's that for most of the road to the tragedy of the 2016 referendum they weren't Brexiters but Euro-sceptics. For most of that time, they weren't campaigning for Brexit to happen tomorrow, but against a particular aspect of the EU. That is how they built up a broad coalition of support to get Brexit through.

In turn, we need to do the same in reverse – to recognise that even many Remainers are put off by 'let's rejoin the EU now!', but that even those who voted Leave can be won over by **campaigning issue by issue on the merits of cooperation with our neighbours**.

It's an approach that party members [overwhelmingly supported](#) in our recent (with a record-breaking response!) consultation.

At our spring federal conference, we'll be fleshing out the details of what this means when we debate a motion which [sets out our comprehensive plan to reconnect our political and trading relationship with Europe](#).

### **Getting party reform right**

Our Federal Board is currently 41, which means we have **approximately one Federal Board member for every two members of Federal staff**. That isn't just a quixotic statistic, it's also a sign of something wrong with how the party's governance structures work.

As our [independent review of the 2019 election found](#):

"The lack of connection between operational, political and governing parts of the party has created structures which foster a lack of collaboration and isolated decision making";

"There is no clear 'leadership team' where the three pillars of the party – political, operational, federal – can make cohesive decisions, simply, quickly, and effectively. The Federal Board – 40+ members – is not, cannot, and should not be that team"; and

“The Federal Board was often a ‘rubber-stamp’ and is too large a group to be a realistic decision-making body.”

That’s why we’ve got a motion coming to this Spring conference that would instead give us a Board of 16, bringing together key decision makers across the party along with other **changes made to increase accountability and scrutiny of the new Board**. For example, the changes would also introduce a new power of no-confidence in the President – so that if I go off the rails, I can be held properly to account.

Dorothy Thornhill, who led that review, has [written about why we need these reforms](#) and you can see the [full details in the Spring conference agenda](#).

Under the proposals, over 80% of Board members will be elected by party members – either in all-member elections (such as our elections for Leader and President) or in elections by parts of the party (such as all members in Wales elected the Welsh President, who will be on the Board). But in addition, our internal democracy will also be strengthened by making the Board more effective – because the more a Board is like a talking shop, the more power seeps elsewhere in practice.

**I hope you’ll come to the debate on this**, which will be on the Friday night of our Spring federal conference. [You can register for conference here](#) (and it’s only £5 for first-timers). Or [register here for the Conference Live event](#) being organised alongside it by ALDC.

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## [Getting our technology and tools right: get in the know.](#)

Campaign Technology is one of the most important things for the Liberal Democrats to get right.

Whether it’s canvassing apps, websites or even data entry, **we can’t campaign effectively without the right tools and the right data.**

Over the last 18 months, the LDHQ technology team has been reviewing our data, technology and tools. We’ve also been gathering feedback from the people who use them to help us understand where the problems are at the moment.

That process has identified a number of problems with our current setup, including:

- We aren't getting value for money from our campaigning technology
- Our data quality is low and it is scattered across multiple systems
- Our websites are expensive, hard to maintain and out of date
- We can't give volunteers easy and high-quality information on how their teams are doing and their campaigns are going
- Our tools aren't easy for activists to use

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