

# **The Advancement of Economic Liberalism in the Liberal Democrats**

Building a Four Cornered Liberal Party

Andy Briggs  
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## 1.0 Introduction

Classical liberalism; a belief in free trade, free markets and individualism has a long and proud history within the Liberal Democrats / the Liberal Party<sup>1</sup>. Today, at a time when the party has over 100,000 members<sup>2</sup>, whether we refer to ourselves as 'classical liberals', 'economic liberals' 'Orange Bookers' or, in some cases, even prefer to reclaim the 'neoliberal' label, the tradition is as strong as ever.

However, since the days of William Gladstone, classical/economic liberalism as an ideology has often lost out to more interventionist liberal thought when it comes to party policy. The aim of this paper is to formulate a plan of action to further the classical/economic liberal cause, so that in the future the policy positions of the Liberal Democrats better reflect a four cornered (economic, social, personal and political)<sup>3</sup> approach to liberalism.

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<sup>1</sup> Davies S, 2012, 'Classical Liberalism in the Liberal Party since 1886', Economic Affairs,

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-39694417>

<sup>3</sup> Laws D, 2004, 'The Orange Book - Reclaiming Liberalism', Profile Books, pp. 18-42.

## 2.0 Yellow Tories? – What We Believe

“Why don’t you just join the Tories?” is a question not unfamiliar to classical and economic liberals in the Liberal Democrats. Many of us have found ourselves on the receiving end of this question from other party members, whilst a fair few of us will have asked it of ourselves. The truth of the answer is that, quite simply, we are not conservatives, indeed there is very little that is conservative about us.

Whilst we may sometimes find ourselves in agreement with Conservatives on economic policy, this is quite often where the agreement ends. A failure of classical/economic Liberals in the past has been to focus too much on our disagreements with other members of the party, rather than re-asserting many of our shared beliefs. Our commitment to market economics in no way compromises our belief in political reform, civil and human rights, internationalism and environmentalism. Conservative support for these values varies from the sketchy to the completely non-existent, and this is why we are Liberal Democrats. In the future classical/economic liberals must stress that there is no conflict between economic, social, political and personal liberalism, and that our vision for the future is a country that embraces them all.

To add to this, it is important to realise that in our defence of economic liberalism it is all too easy to fall into the trap of defending the status-quo. This is not what we stand for. Like our fellow party members we recognise the failures of the current system and whilst our solutions may differ, guiding the invisible hand<sup>4</sup> of the market rather than imposing the heavy hand of the state, our goals very much align. We cannot let ourselves be hypocritical; we cannot reject the idea of state monopoly without also challenging private monopolies where they occur. Our task as economic/classical liberals is to find market based solutions to both, fighting for individuals, not vested interests.

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<sup>4</sup> Smith A, 1759, ‘The Theory of Moral Sentiments’, Part IV, Chapter I, pp.184-5.

## 3.0 Building a Four Cornered Liberal Party

In order to grow the classical/economic liberal tradition within the Liberal Democrats significant action needs to be taken. Whilst we may favour a laissez-faire approach to the economy, we cannot afford a similar approach to party politics. Below, I have listed just a few suggestions as to how to build a movement within the Liberal Democrats that will vastly improve our chances of creating the party we wish to be.

### 3.1 Recruitment

In truth, with the majority of members having joined post-2015 (many on the back of the EU Referendum result), and the lack of a major internal election since, it's hard to say exactly where the ideological pulse of the party is at. However, it would be unwise to suggest that in the two years of Tim Farron's leadership the party became a hot bed of classical/economic liberal thought. Other than a small section of the 2017 Spring Conference Leader's Speech<sup>5</sup>, little was done to unite classical/economic liberals from outside of the party under the Liberal Democrat banner.

Signs that Vince Cable will fair better in this regard are mixed, but to be frank it does not much matter. In order to build a movement strong enough to take classical/economic liberalism into the Liberal Democrat mainstream, current economic/classical liberals within the Lib Dems must take it upon themselves to recruit like-minded persons to the cause. At a time when both Labour and the Conservatives look to take on ever more interventionist policy<sup>6</sup>, there's never been a better time to bring those of all parties and none who subscribe to our vision of liberalism on board. In order to convince these people however, it is important to be able to show them an existing strong, ambitious group of members ready to take the movement forward, and for that, much better organisation is needed.

### 3.2 Organisation

As liberals who pride individualism above all else, collective organisation does not come naturally to us. However the current lack of organisation means that we are constantly under threat of being outmanoeuvred by better organised Liberal groups. The current home of classical/economic liberalism within the

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.libdems.org.uk/tim-farron-conference-speech>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/theresa-may-speech-live-energy-bills-price-cap-u-turn-prices-tory-conference-latest-a7982586.html>

Liberal Democrats is Liberal Reform<sup>7</sup>, but the membership numbers of Liberal Reform do not reflect the number of classical/economic liberals within the wider party. This must change. All those who are in favour of a four cornered Liberal party must be encouraged to join and engage with the organisation, as it is only with co-ordination that we can build momentum. Co-ordination is the key to everything we do, whether it is online or on the conference hall floor, or else we risk not only appearing amateurish but also failing in our goals.

There is a lot to be learned from the success of other Liberal Democrat fringe groups, in particular the Social Liberal Forum (SLF)<sup>8</sup> and the Radical Association<sup>9</sup>. Both these groups appear active all year round, not just during party conference season, allowing them to attract the attention of potential supporters and those higher up the Liberal Democrat hierarchy. This of course is made possible not only by a large amount of committed volunteers, but also in the case of the SLF, significant funds. Whilst during the infancy of our organisation membership should remain free of charge, the question of funding the organisation through a membership levy, as the SLF does, should not remain unanswered.

Building a sizable, well co-ordinated membership organisation will go some way to earning the influence on party policy we seek, however, alone it is not enough. In order to build our influence further, we must be prepared to stand up and be counted.

### **3.3 Stand Up and be Counted**

The real influence on party policy within the Liberal Democrats lies in its committees, the Federal Board (FB), the Federal Policy Committee (FPC) and the Federal Conference Committee (FCC). For a classical/economic liberal movement to be successful in its aims, it must be prepared to have members stand and win in elections to these committees. As with any political movement, you can only enact real change when in power.

Getting elected to these committees is by no means an impossible task. The existence of social media means that getting the signatures required to stand is relatively straight forward, and it also provides great access to potential voters. Votes cast in these elections are as based on name recognition and popularity as they are policy positions, and social media, in particular Liberal Democrat Facebook groups such as 'Lib Dem Newbies UK'<sup>10</sup> (which has over 6,000 members), are great tools for building both relatively quickly. Other methods

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.liberalreform.org.uk/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.socialliberal.net/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://radicalassociation.org/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/LibDemNewbiesUK/>

include contributing to Liberal Democrat Voice<sup>11</sup>, and speaking at party conference.

The manifesto of a classical/economic liberal candidate, whilst secondary to name recognition and popularity, is still important. It is vital that any manifesto reflects all four strands of liberal thought, or else it risks alienating vast swathes of potential backers. Whilst you may deem knowing the 'Orange Book' inside-out a desirable quality in a candidate, it's unlikely to be seen that way by many others; the best way to achieve electoral success is appealing to values that the vast majority of Liberal Democrat members hold dear (pro-Europeanism is a good example), not by appearing divisive.

Classical/economic liberal candidates should be chosen well in advance of any election, and it should then be the duty of other classical/economic liberal members and organisations to help build the profile of these candidates. Leaving it up to the individual to campaign alone equates to a far lesser chance of success. In the past other organisations, most notably the SLF, have run a slate of candidates for internal elections; whilst this may sit uncomfortably with some, it is certainly something a classical/economic liberal organisation should look into.

In the short term, whilst potential candidates for elections may be few in number, it is important to prioritise the elections that candidates are entered into. Whilst FCC perhaps does not have the same grandeur as FB and FPC, it is none the less important, particularly as it holds the key to which policy motions and amendments make it to the conference floor. In the past, economically liberal policy motions and amendments have been submitted to FCC, only to find them rejected, as the committee does not lean in classical/economic liberal's favour. A healthy number of classical/economic liberal representatives on this committee would ensure that in the future this is far less likely, and should therefore be seen as the number one priority for the time being.

### **3.4 Think Big**

For a lasting impact, a classical/economic liberal organisation cannot simply exist to co-ordinate members and run candidates in elections; it must also come up with policies that will help shape the direction of the party. In a recent paper by Mark Pack and Jim Williams<sup>12</sup> there is talk of creating a Liberal Democrat ecosystem of think tanks, special interest and pressure groups. A classical/economic liberal organisation should desire to be at the heart of it. There is often much talk of developing party policy that is unique, making the Liberal Democrats stand out against the two other major parties; classical/economic liberals should embrace this, and invest time coming up with

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<sup>11</sup> [www.libdemvoice.org](http://www.libdemvoice.org)

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.markpack.org.uk/151426/reinventing-liberal-democrats/>

radical market based policy of our own. For too long classical/economic liberals in the Liberal Democrats have had to rely on the brain power of Conservative aligned think tanks such as the Adam Smith Institute<sup>13</sup> for policy ideas; this does nothing but play into the narrative that we are secret Tories in disguise. A classical/economic liberal organisation that develops policy embracing the 4 corners of liberalism will provide the bedrock of classical/economic liberal success within the Liberal Democrats for decades to come.

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.adamsmith.org/>

## About the Author

Andy Briggs is a Liberal Democrat member from the south of England. He joined the party in response to the General Election result of 2015, having previously been an enthusiastic supporter of the coalition government. Outside of the party, he studies MSc Governance & Policy at the University of Southampton.

