

# The Generous Society

A vision for the future liberals want

*by Tom King*

*Our vision is to see individual freedom, human diversity and ingenuity, and natural beauty flourish and advance within a generous and free society.*

*"A REVOLUTIONARY MOMENT IN THE WORLD'S HISTORY  
IS A TIME FOR REVOLUTIONS, NOT FOR PATCHING" –  
**WILLIAM BEVERIDGE***

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# Liberalism under lockdown

**The global covid-19 pandemic has created the largest public health crisis in living memory.** It continues to take the lives of hundreds of thousands worldwide. In our own country, the official toll is still rising, and many estimates put the true number far higher. Every death is a tragedy, the loss of a human being with dignity and inherent worth. And alongside that loss comes a wider loss – to families, friends, communities and our entire society.

Beyond the immediate and catastrophic loss of life, however, the pandemic is also one of **the greatest social challenges** we have ever faced in peacetime. The virus and its impact has shaken and sometimes reduced to rubble the foundations of our beliefs and assumptions about how we structure our lives, workplaces, societies, economies, and governments. The UK state has found itself unable to protect its citizens in good time – for all kinds of reasons. Some of these are forgivable and outside any government's power. Some are systemic and require long-term action. And some are due to actions governments have taken, some recent, some over decades, that have weakened our society and reduced our resilience, while also impoverishing our lives and the way we treat one another.

For liberals, the crisis has had a particularly sharp edge. We have found ourselves in a position where we are forced to support a drastic and indefinite curtailment of some of our most basic civil liberties. The freedom to move, to assemble, to socialise as we please: all have been temporarily abandoned in the interests of protecting those around us, and in sharing responsibility.

The willingness of people to respond creatively, bravely, stoically, and in many cases heroically to this situation has confirmed all that liberals – who are natural optimists – believe about humanity's best traits and instincts. This response has not been confined to any nationality, or

belief system; it has been a truly global effort. It shows the solidarity we can create together to reduce harm.

These temporary sacrifices have been admirable and necessary. But they have also been salutary. **By relinquishing our liberty, we have also seen just how captured our society – and our world – is.** Just as with the period of ‘austerity’ that followed the global financial crisis, we have not ‘all been in this together’. The measures to combat covid-19 have disproportionately impoverished the already poor, and our public health system has disproportionately failed people from more vulnerable backgrounds, especially black and brown people, and elderly people in institutional care settings.

There has been talk of ‘going back to normal’ during this crisis. But there can be no going back. **We have an historic opportunity to emerge from drastic limitations into a newly liberated society.** Increasing freedom and improving lives must be the aim – or we will have missed the opportunity. It is time to **rethink** what we want from our lives and from our society, and to **reform** our politics and economics around new purposes.

## Waking the sleeping giant

The word ‘liberal’ – at least as used in modern politics – has a strong case for being the most mistreated in the English language. It is casually strewn throughout discussion of politicians, activists and media figures from all parties and none. Most egregiously, it is often forced into use as an adjective attempting to amend and soften nouns that are its natural opposite, in unwieldy formulations like ‘liberal conservatism’ or ‘liberal socialism’.

Since the Liberal Party faded into obscurity, replaced by the Labour Party as the major opposition to the Conservatives, the understanding

of what liberalism is, and what liberal parties stand for, has faded too. Almost no one living in Britain today has experienced a liberal government. Almost no one in Britain can likely conceive of a majority liberal government in the next decade. Meanwhile, the five years of coalition government between the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, with its 5:1 ratio of MPs, has only served to confuse people more about what liberals believe and want – a severe political failure.

Other parties have often borrowed at least some of liberalism's clothes and – in particular – its policies relating to social and cultural freedoms and equalities. We can think, for instance, of Roy Jenkins' liberal policies as a Labour Home Secretary, during which time abortion and sex between men were decriminalised (with Liberal Party support and in the former case, via a Liberal MP's private member's bill) and censorship was reduced. Later, the advocacy of Lib Dem MPs secured the legalisation of same-sex marriage, introduced gender pay gap reporting and successfully outlawed 'upskirting'. These changes and others have ensured that the UK remains a 'liberal democracy' in many people's eyes. We naturally champion and welcome change that results in more equal rights under the law and reduces discrimination.

Despite our relative lack of influence in raw numbers, this demonstrates the continuing power of the liberal approach. Throughout our time in the political wilderness, we have nonetheless pushed other parties to adopt our policies and shamed them into changing their mind. Starting with the post-war expansion of the welfare state – based on the Liberal William Beveridge's great proposal for a national health service, and the 1906 Liberal government's social reforms (pensions, free school meals, labour exchanges, minimum wages, health insurance, and many others) – there have been many subsequent achievements proving liberalism punches well above its weight. The pandemic's enormous impact on our country and our world offers a similar opportunity for change.

Clear examples in recent memory are the Iraq war and Brexit: two grave errors on which the Liberal Democrats provided the main opposition in both cases, either because the major parties were united or because they could not agree among themselves. Liberals were fighting to uphold the law, maintain the rights of UK and EU citizens, and protect the UK's reputation and place in the world. On the same basis, we have strongly advocated political and military intervention where we believe it is justified and would uphold and strengthen international law: in 1989 we stood up for Hong Kong citizens, as we still do today, and we demanded the international community did not turn its face away from the genocides taking place in Bosnia and Rwanda. Closer to home, Lib Dem ministers between 2010 and 2015 secured key changes: laying the foundations for a massive expansion in the UK's renewable energy output, securing shared parental leave, and implementing automatic pension enrolment – reducing harm to the environment, promoting equality and freeing millions from poverty in retirement.

But without wider, deeper reforms to bring liberation across politics, law, and society, our society cannot truly be described as liberal. And these reforms will never take place unless liberals are able to articulate the kind of society we want to see. The Lib Dems as a party are at a low ebb in the public imagination. This is partly because of the political cycle the party finds itself in – with only 11 MPs, not even the third party in the House of Commons, and far from the visibility and influence it had from 1997 to 2015. But there is no excuse for a political party of any size to leave voters uncertain on its vision and what it wants to change. This was the clearest conclusion drawn from the party's own commendably candid review of the general election: "the Liberal Democrats had not translated their beliefs into a clear and relevant vision or the strategy to put it into place".

**Without fundamental renewal of the liberal movement – based on a new vision that reimagines how our values should be applied – liberalism itself will never awaken in the United Kingdom.** And if this sleeping giant does not awaken, the UK's current dismal trajectory – one of increasing isolation, international embarrassment, rejection of the rule of law, and divisive politics pitting groups against each other – will never be arrested, let alone corrected.

## The starting point for a liberal vision

One of the reasons it is hard to articulate this vision is that liberalism has no natural endpoint. It reckons with the complexity of human behaviour and the myriad ways we aspire to create and shape our individual lives, families, and societies. More than that, it welcomes and celebrates this complexity. This in itself precludes any single, simple definition of what 'the good life' looks like. It also precludes the use of power to force society and our economy into a predefined mould.

In this way, liberalism is different from the more dominant models of both socialism and conservatism. We do not believe in a state that centralises power and uses it to destroy private enterprise and appropriate private property, eventually 'withering away' when total sameness is finally embraced. Nor do we believe in a state that elevates traditions, institutions and behaviours of the past or the present to the level of myth – and in protecting them, defends the privileges and inequalities that they create and sustain.

Liberals start from John Stuart Mill's great principle of individual sovereignty: that each person is sovereign over their own body and mind. We continue to agree with the principle he advanced alongside this, that "the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or



collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection". The way governments are combatting covid-19 rests heavily on this principle. We have never before seen, nor may we again see, this level of interference in liberty of action in the name of self-protection. It is warranted, but temporary. **It must be followed by a time of unprecedented liberation – for everyone.**

If we are really to rethink and reform our society fundamentally as we emerge from this crisis, we must reclaim these timeless principles. If we could boil down a liberal vision into one phrase, perhaps this might be it: **To see individual freedom, human diversity and ingenuity, and natural beauty flourish and advance within a generous and free society.**

***Our vision is to see individual freedom, human diversity and ingenuity, and natural beauty flourish and advance within a generous and free society.***

As citizens in 2020, we are perhaps better placed than almost any previous generation to understand what individual sovereignty looks like. We are the children of the advertising revolution: weaned on the concept of consumer power and taught the price of everything. We learn to choose before we can talk. When we go to the supermarket or to the corner shop, and especially when we browse Amazon, eBay or Etsy, we expect to see and weigh almost limitless choices.

And yet in too many other areas of our lives – far more important areas than which brand of cereal or toilet paper we intend to buy – our choice, and thus our reality, is limited. We can think of four ever-larger realms of life in which liberals demand and pursue greater generosity and freedom: the personal, the political, the social, and the global.

# The personal realm

Liberals have long been in the vanguard of the movement for greater personal freedom. There are countless differences in how humans appear, live, and interact with others. This creates natural and beautiful variation. But societies and governments the world over reject this natural and beautiful variation. They instead misuse legal systems and whip up hostility to force people to conform, to stigmatise and punish them, and to prevent them from benefiting from the protections, rights, and social acceptance that others have long enjoyed.

Even when societies are less directly antagonistic and restrictive, we see time and again that some people are forgotten and excluded by powerful people with no knowledge of their lives. Those with disabilities often have to fight to be remembered by our government and our public services. They have faced punitive sanctions at Jobcentres, must often fight to afford food and warmth, and face discrimination in the workplace – all while their costs are higher than others' to start with. Even MPs with disabilities, whom we have elected to represent us, were temporarily disenfranchised by a government that insists on risking their health by enforcing physical voting. In a liberal society, everyone is valued. No one should be an afterthought – instead, we must empower people to be able to fully participate as equals.

The systemic racism that shames our country and many others must cease. Whether it is the protests sparked by the murder of George Floyd, the tragedy of Grenfell, or the disproportionate loss of black and brown lives to covid-19, we see examples daily of this injustice. The tragic death of Belly Mujinga, the railway worker spat at by a man claiming to have the virus, perhaps draws together these threads most acutely. A generous liberal society demands more than future equality, but justice for past and present crimes. It is time that our housing, our policing, our justice system, our public services and our politics all

reflected and honoured the rich ethnic diversity of our society and all those who contribute to that diversity.

Just as we are coming to see race-based bigotry for what it is, simplistic beliefs in two genders, two roles, or one sexuality must also be consigned to the past, despite the best efforts of conservatives on both the right and the left to cling onto them. But our laws and society still do not reflect scientific evidence nor lived reality for countless people who feel forced into moulds that don't fit. And there are still more powerful, influential people whose lives are dedicated to stopping them from having the freedom that is their birthright. Liberals must fight passionately to ensure they have that freedom, and soon enough that it can be enjoyed in full.

For all those who have been subjected over centuries to bigotry and ignorance, access to justice is especially vital and urgent. A liberal society is one where people can challenge and overcome injustice without disadvantage and without being forced into poverty. It is time to start listening seriously to those who have suffered injustice the longest, and putting their ideas into action urgently. By doing this, we will also build a stronger foundation from which we can demand justice from other nations that have too long ignored their own bigotry and injustice. And we can create truly just laws that anticipate and encourage wider social change.

Any vision for a liberal society must start here: **nonconformity** is the wellspring of wellbeing. The pressure of conformity reduces the richness of our individual and collective lives and robs us of the most precious freedom of all: our unique identity. Every single person must feel inherently accepted and valued. Liberals are traditionally good at standing up for the weak against the strong, and being champions of the marginalised and the oppressed. But our vision must be of a **society where no one needs to fight for extra support or protection just to be themselves.**

# The political realm

This embrace of individual expression and self-confidence can only be achieved if we extend true choice and individual sovereignty into the political realm and the public square.

It is here that the collusion of our authoritarian opponents is most blatant. This is because they know fundamental change to how our society works can only come through the political system. The limits they deliberately place on our right to choose those who govern us are the source of a galvanising anger for some, and deadening apathy for others. For all that Brexit is a catastrophic policy for individual rights, the economy and the nation, this is perhaps its greatest crime: offering false hope to people who have been offered almost no representation, no control, and no choice in the decisions their governments make.

Taking the same principle of nonconformity, our vision for society is pluralistic. We believe in proportional representation not merely because it is the obvious mathematical and ethical way to construct a real democracy. We champion it because it allows new and awkward voices to be heard, and overbearing voices to be put in their place. The concept of long-lasting, single-party majority government ought in itself to worry a liberal.

Instead, our vision relies on a political system that maximises enfranchisement and representation – extending it beyond citizenship and nationality, to all those who are directly affected by decisions made in government, and who are subject to direct taxation. Everyone with a stake in society should be represented. Our vision, in short, is of **a society where everyone has a voice and a stake, and where power flows upwards only where this meets our needs efficiently and fairly.**

# The social realm

A standard definition of the social realm might be the area where we use our identities and skills - both to earn a living through work, and to spend what we have earned on leisure and loved ones. But the pandemic has also highlighted the importance of the non-monetary benefits we gain from living in communities, and how much poorer we are without them.

Here, again, decades of illiberal government have resulted in our choices being snatched away from us. At a fundamental level, people are increasingly questioning whether the very concept of work is still relevant in a time where scarcity of resources is becoming less relevant. If resources were distributed more efficiently throughout society, it is possible that far fewer of us would need to work as much, or at all; something the great liberal economist John Maynard Keynes had predicted that has not yet come to pass.

The great tendency of socialists and capitalists alike is to treat human beings primarily as units of labour. This again diminishes human variety and imagination. Liberals instead believe in a diverse economy: one where those who wish to sell their labour can do so at a fair rate, but one where others can choose to retrain, start their own enterprise, or become part-owners of their workplaces. By treating all those involved as adults, and encouraging cooperation and creativity, we can finally move away from the obstructive, adversarial practices of the more militant trade unions and the exploitative actions of greedy bosses.

Our idea of the social realm must also encompass the natural world. Climate change continues to be a great unaddressed challenge of our time. Liberals have always understood the importance of ensuring that the great diversity of all living things is protected. But for too long attempts to address this problem have been focused on mitigation of

harm, and not expansion of our ambition. We should find new ways to present the benefits of following science – including the richness of a life of travel, exploration and adventure. The covid-19 pandemic has awakened many people’s hunger to spend time in open spaces and to see wild, untamed, awe-inspiring places. This is an opportunity to reframe our common goals. It is time we honoured the natural world we depend on, and do all we can to ensure that future generations can have the same freedom we have collectively enjoyed – even as we expand that enjoyment to everyone today.

Our vision is ultimately for **a society where every individual can enrich themselves, materially and spiritually, in the ways they choose.** For liberals this is not purely financial. People may choose to forgo wealth, a larger income, or a more ‘successful’ life in exchange for time, privacy, pleasure, or education. Many people also use their time, energy and money to contribute to the rest of society. While we believe in a more equal society – both in terms of opportunity and outcome – we also believe in the ingenuity of humans to define their own happiness and seek it, regardless of what that may look like to others.

# The global realm

Liberals are committed internationalists – believers in free movement of goods, services, people and ideas. It is for this reason that we so strongly support cooperation between countries to enable these freedoms. We support international organisations including the European Union and the United Nations because they offer the chance to advance liberal goals, enhancing individual sovereignty around the world.

Globalisation has had many positive effects on the world. It is also fundamentally liberal to allow people and goods to flow freely around the world. However, the expansion of cross-border trade and an internationalised financial system has also created huge downsides. The UK has played an outsized role in the damage done. The City of London is arguably the financial centre that has most enabled illicit financial flows from the developing world, stealing wealth from the citizens who create it, and placing it far away where it cannot be taxed or otherwise recovered. Crown dependencies and overseas territories governed by the UK are often the recipients and guardians of this wealth.

Rule of law ensures no one is above or outside the law, upholding our deeply human sense of fairness and justice. But our own governments have eroded this - the foundation upon which a liberal society rests. Most recently, the dangerous populist antics of Theresa May and Boris Johnson, threatening our European allies and then our own parliament, media and judiciary, have contributed to deep divisions in our society. Liberals want rulers kept in their place - and held accountable when they break the rules they set for us all.

The principle of individual sovereignty is once again our guiding star as we consider the UK's place in the world. It was partly because politicians have failed to articulate the great value of international cooperation in expanding individual freedoms – not only in the European Union,

but especially there – that so many voters ultimately chose to torch their own right to travel, study, work, and live in 27 other countries.

But liberals also know that we have a responsibility to every human being. The best reason for the UK to assert itself internationally and maintain a strong commitment to rule of law is as an advocate and guarantor of the same rights in other countries. The more we erode our national standing, the less we are able to do that. Our vision is of **a society that can be proud of Britain's achievements in and for the world.**

## Our commitment

Therefore, we renew our commitment to build a free and generous society in which:

- no one needs to fight for extra support or protection just to be themselves
- everyone has a voice and a stake, and where power flows upwards only where this meets our needs more efficiently and fairly
- every individual can enrich themselves, materially and spiritually, in the ways they choose
- we can be proud of Britain's achievements in and for the world



# The challenges to our vision

Liberals have always faced an uphill battle. Even at the zenith of the Liberal Party's political power, after the landslide election victory of 1906 under Herbert Asquith, the House of Lords blocked key social reforms that could have transformed the UK far more radically than the introduction of pensions, free school meals, labour exchanges, and minimum wages (which were all achieved during the same parliament). In particular, the introduction of a land value tax – the most efficient form of taxation, and one that could transform economies at a stroke – has always been opposed, despite winning the support of many leading economists and commentators including Joseph Stiglitz and Martin Wolf.

This opposition stems from one of liberalism's most entrenched enemies: powerful groups with vested or special interests. We object to these in every sphere – from political parties that represent only certain groups in society, to landlords and rentiers who make money without a significant contribution to society, to trade unions and other producer interest groups who use their influence to arrest change that would benefit the public. Of course, these groups often overlap.

These groups are powerful because they weaponise the support of their members to maximise their influence, often using methods that are opaque even to those same members, let alone to wider society. Moreover, they harness negative emotion in a way that a party dedicated to the whole of society cannot. At their worst, such groups become tribal, rejecting out of hand the opinions of others purely because of their inherent difference, and whipping up fear among their own supporters. This, in turn, can generate a collective sense of temporary or permanent victimhood that can come to define the whole political narrative.

The UK is subject to many of these vested interests and battered by the divisive forces they unleash. The political and social volatility we have endured over the past decade is merely the culmination of a long decline. But the natural inclination of the human brain towards division – an ‘in group’ and ‘out group’, as sociologists describe it – has been accelerated by the information environment we now inhabit.

The ‘social media’ platforms that we almost universally use can give us a warped sense of reality in which our own interests and allegiances are amplified. Being exposed to a greater variety and volume of opinion has many benefits. It has however made hatred, extremism and conspiracy theories far more widely accessible too. The emerging body of evidence on the way algorithms can radicalise political views and spread falsehood has yet to be fully understood – nor have we developed good solutions for our collective decision-making processes, including democracy itself, in the light of these developments.

We cannot give in to these forces. When we allow them to dominate, we end up with a smaller, meaner society: one in which the powerful encourage the weak to turn on each other. The scapegoating of vulnerable people and groups becomes commonplace. We have seen the vitriol meted out to immigrants, people with disabilities, and people who rely on social security in recent times. Trans people and people of colour especially face constant and organised hatred and abuse online. There will always be people who are trying to limit the freedom of others. Our struggle for generosity and freedom is never over.

There is a final challenge. Some people encountering this vision for the first time will worry that it is simply too generous. This is not correct. Humans are imperfect. That’s why political and economic power needs to be spread out. And it is why any welfare system is, occasionally, abused. A liberal society strives to reduce fraud, even though we know we’ll never reach perfection. But we are honest that it will happen – and

that it is a price worth paying for real security and freedom for every person.

Liberals believe in the rule of law, and its use to curb behaviour that does harm. But more fundamentally still, we want people to have true freedom – and you cannot have that without some people choosing to misuse it. This is a feature, not a failing, of a free society. We trust in a liberated people to treat those who abuse the system with justice – and generosity.

## Fundamental freedoms to liberate Britain

*“... NO ONE SHALL BE ENSLAVED BY POVERTY, IGNORANCE OR CONFORMITY” –  
PREAMBLE TO THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATS’ CONSTITUTION*

### Liberated from... poverty

#### Freedom to create and earn

All humans should have the freedom to use their creativity and talents, whether for financial gain, artistic or cultural pursuits, political activism, religious worship, or any number of other activities. At present, large numbers of people in our society are unable to do this because their mental and physical energies are required simply to make ends meet – and often despite their best efforts, even this is impossible. No economist can calculate the beauty and wonder lost from our world because of the restrictions our society has placed on the freedom to create and contribute. We must reduce the burden on those who want the dignity and peace that comes with a secure, well-paid job – but

instead find themselves ripped off, spied on, or otherwise mistreated by their employers. In a liberal society, **you will not have to spend excessive physical and mental energy on basic needs.**

In the same way, the covid-19 pandemic has revealed once again the depth of inequality and injustice in health and social care. We know that too many people die or suffer from preventable diseases. While much of this depends on the NHS, governments have largely failed to encourage other aspects of a healthy life – from cycle lanes to green spaces to the availability of therapy. We must also correct for the long term the failings of our social care system. In a liberal society, **you will have the support you need to improve your physical and mental health, and to be cared for throughout your life.**

Meanwhile, individuals often require support – whether financial, educational, or technological – to realise their ambitions. Yet governments often cut support for individuals trying to create new products or services that bring new benefits to society. Worse, they often retain or even extend support or subsidy to large, profitable companies that have no need of state aid or tax benefits. By tackling this unfairness and redistributing resources more equitably, we can unleash the talent and potential of millions and create far greater economic diversity. Therefore, in a liberal society, **you will be free to create and contribute to new products, services, and enterprises.**

Finally, we all need inspiration. Arts and culture are fundamental to many people's wellbeing, especially their mental health. But they can also be the spark that ignites the imagination of future writers, musicians, painters, sculptors and film-makers. Governments have rightly maintained free access to some of our country's key galleries and museums, but this has too often resulted in benefit only to citizens living near those physical locations, especially in London. Liberals want to spread these benefits across the UK, and to see new audiences and appreciators given the chance to have mind-expanding, spirit-enhancing

experiences. In a liberal society, **you will have greater and more affordable access and opportunity to contribute to inspiring arts and culture.**

## **Freedom to shape your surroundings**

Humans are creatures of habit. We value our homes and seek to improve them, making them more in keeping with our unique identities. Therefore one of our society's biggest failures is that millions of people in the UK do not have affordable, spacious, and pleasant housing. Many who do still have little power to change and improve their surroundings, because they are renting from landlords who place restrictions on their preferences. Many more are forced to move regularly, creating permanent instability and uncertainty in their lives. And still more live in unsafe, overcrowded dwellings, poorly insulated from the cold, or with landlords who refuse to make vital upgrades to reduce their energy bills or protect them from fire or flooding. This is unacceptable and needs to be an urgent priority, but governments have refused to act. In a liberal society, **you will be empowered to choose the type of housing you want.**

After our homes, the place we spend most time in as adults is our workplace. But again, too many of us have had our creativity curtailed and our enjoyment diminished by the ways that those who own and run the companies, organisations or charities we work for choose to control us. There is little room for individual sovereignty here – yet many scientific studies suggest that when workers have greater flexibility and autonomy, they are often more productive. The experience of covid-19 has been instructive for those resistant to change – but there is a long way to go. We need to rethink and reform the relationship between workers and bosses. In a liberal society, **you will be empowered to negotiate with your employer for employment or ownership terms that better fit your needs.**

Just as important as these changes is to give everyone real power to shape the local communities they live in. We all care about the streets we live on, the quality of the roads we walk, cycle and drive on, the local parks we spend time in. Our high streets remain vital hubs of social activity and local enterprise. Local government is a casualty of centuries of centralisation. This not only harms our politics and centralises power; it also greatly reduces our ability to use our own influence to offer ideas and hold our representatives accountable. Many people have no idea what services are provided by which tier of government. This is not their fault, but the fault of a system in which responsibility is frequently pinned on others, and where decision-making is too often remote from the people the decisions affect. In a liberal society, **you will have local representatives with real power and funding – and you will be empowered to hold them properly accountable.**

## Freedom to move, live and love

One of the most insidious consequences of poverty is that it robs us of choices that others have. An ironic tragedy of covid-19 is that it has harmed many more poor people than rich, but it has been spread all over the world by the wealthy. Frequent travel across national borders – especially by air – is still a behaviour that relatively few people in society ever enjoy, but it is central to the pandemic we all now face.

Inequality of opportunity to see and enjoy the world is bad enough without governments that seek to limit our freedom further. Our governments' craven failure to appreciate the energy and diversity of people coming from elsewhere to live and work among us, and the innumerable benefits they bring to our society, have led to ever tighter restrictions. This has led in many cases to families being torn apart, living separately because they cannot meet arbitrary financial or employment requirements. We must end this injustice and restore people's right to build relationships where and with whom they choose. In

a liberal society, **you will be free to live with the people you love – regardless of nationality and income.**

Building on this right, we must also extend people's rights to explore the world. Brexit is a small-minded destructive act that removes the rights of all UK citizens to live, study, and work in 27 other countries. We would of course seek to restore these rights as a starting point, but we can go much further. In all the breathless talk of free trade agreements – which according to official government analysis would bring almost no extra benefit to our economy – there is no consideration of what could be done to create more freedom for individuals. In a liberal society, **you will be free to explore, travel and work in an ever-growing number of other countries.**

A final key point: to say we have the freedom to move is meaningless if we are forced to choose, for example, between clean air and good jobs. If we are forced to live a transient or unstable life so that we can pursue our ambitions, that is also no kind of freedom. In a liberal society, **you will be free from false choices.**

## **Freedom to be generous**

Because of the enormous inequalities we see in our society today, there is another disparity liberals should want to address. People's views may differ on the concept of philanthropy: some more cynical people might say that both high net worth individuals and corporations who choose to distribute tiny slivers of their wealth to their chosen causes are securing for themselves an unwarranted halo, while others might simply applaud what they see as a simple act of social solidarity and generosity, welcoming the act of giving, however small donations are as a portion of the giver's wealth. Whatever our views on the motivations of those who have such enormous wealth that they can afford to become proxies for insufficiently funded public services – whether in their own countries or elsewhere – the choice to be generous should not be confined to so few.

To make generosity a possibility for everyone, we must ensure that people are no longer competing for too few resources. Many aspects of comfort and wellbeing should not be subject to any kind of competition. We must also ensure that people are having to balance fewer competing demands: on their time, their energy, and their money. By rethinking and reforming the way our society works in a liberal fashion, we can ensure that for many people, **life will no longer be a competition for scarce resources.**

One of the ways we can make this happen is by returning our public services and social security system to their proper place. Rather than being a stretched and threadbare patchwork quilt of underfunded services, incapable of meeting today's demands, let alone tomorrow's, we should be honest with voters about what is required to create resilience and spare capacity in key systems like health, social care, and education. This is what a generous society offers to its citizens. By doing so, we can reduce the power of the philanthropists, making **charity an optional extra to public insurance and social security, rather than a poor replacement.**

## Liberated from... ignorance

### Freedom to learn and grow

Education is one of the most powerful equalising forces in human society. It is no accident that illiberal governments often seek to limit both the variety and scale of education in our country. Recent examples have included the disastrous decision to cut further education and adult skills budgets at a time when many citizens were struggling to find work or retrain for different roles. A liberal's instinct should always be to expand the ways in which an individual can seek out new knowledge and arm themselves with its power.

Yet in our society, inequality of opportunity is baked in before many of our children have even learned to speak or read. Social mobility



in the UK has been in decline for some time, and perceptions of life chances are drastically different depending on the region of the country you visit. There is a palpable sense of pessimism about life chances for many outside the south-east and London. This pessimism is felt particularly strongly among the young. This cannot stand. Instead, our vision is for a country where everyone has a great education, where money cannot buy you an automatic advantage, and where robust law prevents any such advantage from carrying through into adulthood. In a liberal society, **you will not experience lasting privilege or disadvantage through accidents of birth.**

Part of this commitment is the imperative to remove barriers and improve access to all kinds of education, formal and informal. This cannot start only from where people currently are. We must also make sure they have all the infrastructure they need. One of the most painful consequences of covid-19 has been the visible inequality of adaptation: some easily moved to a life lived online, operated from a home with space inside and a garden outside, while others constantly battle poor quality equipment, slow or non-existent internet connections, and cramped conditions, or take risks delivering to and servicing those in safety and comfort. For many children, this will further entrench the unequal start they have already had in life. In a liberal society, **you will not experience barriers to the expertise and resources you need.**

Finally, liberals will always see education as a life-long public good. For too many people in our society, it is something that stops when we turn 18 or 21, after which the horizons of our world contract, rather than expand. It is no wonder that we struggle to keep our minds open, agile, and hopeful when we are so quickly and so permanently consigned to intellectual drudgery. In our vision, there would be continuing access and expanding opportunities for personal, academic and vocational growth. Those who choose to pursue further study should not have to put their financial and personal stability at risk to do so. In a liberal society, **learning will be for your whole life, not just your school days.**

## Freedom to specialise and adapt

Another area where covid-19 may have accelerated change is in the technological arena. Anyone who has followed the rise of modern technology will know that there is deep concern over how automation and artificial intelligence might affect workplaces, taking away jobs from people who do not yet have the skills to adapt.

We believe that the freedom to learn and grow is fundamental to solving this challenge. But so is the freedom to specialise and adapt. For many mid-career people – or even those a few years into a career – a 180 degree turn into an entirely different industry or role may be nearly impossible. It is certainly not something we should expect everyone to cope with on their own. In a generous society, we should rethink and reform the way we support those who need to deepen or alter their skills to create new opportunities for themselves.

Therefore, in a liberal society, **you will be empowered to pursue specialist knowledge and skills.** This goes hand in hand with a commitment to adult education – but it also honours and dignifies the value that comes from exploratory research. The UK has a proud history of contributing new knowledge to the store of human understanding. Without supporting people into positions where they can uncover this knowledge and share it with us, we will lose touch with that heritage.

But at the individual level, we must also find ways to ensure that no one is left behind by technological advances. While we believe strongly that these innovations can bring massive benefits to humanity – whether through improving communications, healthcare, supply chains or many other services we rely on – the human cost must be counted and paid for in full. In a liberal society, **you will be empowered to adapt when technological change creates disadvantages.** And where necessary, that change will be regulated to ensure that it brings benefit to all.

## Freedom to access good information

The internet has changed our relationship with information. Just as the printing press destroyed the role of the church as society's gate-keeper, our always-on information system, built on global social media platforms, has drastically shrunk the role of traditional media sources. They have not disappeared completely – with people turning in record numbers to news broadcasts during the covid-19 crisis. But with the shrinking role of journalists, editors, and newspapers, a void has been left behind. It is too early to tell whether this will ultimately benefit society as the printing press undoubtedly did. But for now, it is creating enormous volatility as we reckon with a sudden new explosion of information.

Society cannot make good decisions without accurate, trustworthy information. At present major countries are presided over by rulers who do not respect truth and who are manipulating the frenetic cacophony of modern information to their own purposes. This has sadly been the case in the UK, where traditional forms of scrutiny and truth-telling have largely been overrun. Liberals' fundamental commitment to freedom of expression here runs up against our equally fundamental commitment to intervene to prevent harm to other individuals. Flooding the information system with misinformation is in some ways a new problem, and is certainly creating new kinds of harm. In a liberal society, **you will be free to find and use trustworthy information, and you will be empowered to hold the powerful accountable.** Armed with this information, **you will be able to make the best decisions for yourself, your family and your community.**

# Liberated from... conformity

## Freedom from economic demands and anxiety

One of the key aspects of individual sovereignty is the belief liberals maintain that all humans have inherent dignity and worth. We must not allow this to be eroded by the way our economy is structured. We are too easily taken in by the idea that if a human is not economically active, or if they are not 'paying their way', they are somehow less worthy of respect and support. This is not the case. It is also what leads to bad policy – such as the current attempt by the Conservatives to equate the salary people are paid with the skills they have. In fact, the opposite is often the case: those who bring the most value to others in society are paid the least. In a liberal society, **your worth and dignity will not be defined by your economic potential.**

Moreover, because of the inherent worth and dignity of every human being, we cannot allow society to accept premature deaths as an acceptable price for economic recovery and growth. This is particularly relevant now, in the context of covid-19, where the UK has already seen far higher numbers of deaths than other countries partly because of reluctance to jeopardise our economy, and where we are likely to see even more because of a premature return to so-called 'normality'. But sadly, it is also the logic of the way economic decisions are often made – with the wealthy cosseted, and those who are vulnerable left to fend for themselves. In a liberal society, **your life will no longer be considered an acceptable loss in the name of collective prosperity.**

## Freedom from state and private intrusion

Another deeply troubling aspect of the technological revolution has been the creation of the so-called 'surveillance economy'. This builds upon natural human curiosity by capturing and monetising

our attention, often using methods that are not transparent to us, and which are based on the science of addiction rather than focused on social benefit. Because of the overwhelming success of these methods, private companies have been able to offer us unprecedented convenience, transforming the way we live and our expectations of what is normal.

But along with this convenience comes a threat: that our information and our data – willingly or unknowingly given – will be used against us. Many examples exist of private companies and political parties testing new methods of targeting on certain customers or voters, or sharing their data illegally with third parties. More troublingly still, the number of data breaches has escalated, with bad actors stealing information on thousands or even millions of people. All of these behaviours risk the privacy and sovereignty of each individual, and are often left unpunished. In a liberal society, **you will not be treated as a gadget, a guinea pig, or a data point**, and **you will have more power and visibility on how your data is used.**

## **Freedom to express yourself fully**

The final freedom is perhaps the most important. It is what all the other freedoms aim to achieve. Humans are infinitely unique and different from each other. It is time that a political party had the courage and the vision to talk about this variety – and not just to talk about it, but to cherish it, to nurture it, and to govern in such a way as to see it flourish and grow. In a liberal society, **the vast diversity of human existence will be celebrated.**

# The generous society can be our future

British politics has recently been exploring new depths. It has become a place where almost any behaviour can be justified in the name of claiming and keeping power. The current government sadly embodies this phenomenon. It is undermining its own efforts to improve society by testing and warping the boundaries of what is tolerable to voters.

Dishonesty and cruelty are no strangers to politics, but they need not be foundational to our expectations of those who serve us as representatives. These behaviours are ultimately symptoms of a deeper problem: cowardice. A refusal to serve the whole of society, giving one or another group preferential treatment, is a failure of leadership borne of a critical lack of bravery. By opening up politics to become more like the society we live in – full of differences and disagreements, but capable of consensus and cooperation – we can find the courage that has driven the finest leaders and public servants in history to put others' needs above their own.

Generosity is a beautiful quality. It is one we all wish to experience from others, especially those with power over us. It is also one we all wish others to experience from us. Perhaps more precisely still, it is one we all wish we had the power to use for those we care about. Finally and fundamentally, we all wish we could be more generous to ourselves: questioning our decisions less, fearing missed opportunity less often, and feeling grateful for the successes of others, rather than envying them. In a liberal society, more people would have these powers, and we would all be vastly richer for it.

It is high time that we built this generous society: one that gives every individual the power to shape their own journey and to create the best possible life they can imagine.

We need not carry on wandering around in the dark, kept from this future. We have the knowledge and the means to achieve it. We need only convince those around us that this vision exists and is achievable.

**We hope you will join us in making this vision a reality.**

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