

# Alistair Carmichael's Autumn Conference 2021 Speech

Every year people flock to the beaches around our coastline. They are places of fun, enjoyment and pleasure.

As an islander the sea defines a lot about you.

**Conservatives and nationalists will tell you that the sea is something that sets us apart,** it divides us from other peoples and countries.

They speak about us being an island nation.

As an islander and a liberal I have always seen it differently.

I have always seen the sea as something that **joins us to other people.**

Years ago I remember sitting on a pier with my children in our car about to get on a ferry.

It was blowing a gale and the waves were coming onto the harbour.

I remember the fear and anxiety that I felt about taking my children onto a modern purpose-built ferry which was going to be guided by a master who was properly qualified and who was not going to take any risks with our safety.

So then you stop and you think for a second.

**How desperate do you have to be to entrust the safety of your children to someone you have never met – someone to whom you have had to pay a fee – not to take them in a modern purpose-built ferry but in an open inflatable boat across a busy shipping lane like the English Channel or some other stretch of water.**

Imagine where that desperation started.

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For hundreds of thousands of people **it is the desperation of that journey that leads them to take these risks.**

That is the reality of the journey that brings so many people to our shores.

I don't know if that reality is just not understood in the Home Office.

I don't know if **our Home Secretary lacks the empathy or imagination to put herself in the place of these desperate people** who take these risks to get to our shores.

But **I do know** that her response to that growing crisis **shames our country**.

we saw Tory MPs queuing up to criticise the RNLi for doing what they exist to do, saving lives at sea"

Her response to **people fleeing from war, persecution or torture** is to send boats out to the middle of the English Channel and force them back towards France as if she is playing some sort of life size game of whack-a-mole.

Except it is no game.

This summer we saw Tory MPs queuing up to criticise the RNLi – the Royal National Lifeboat Institution – for doing what they exist to do, saving lives at sea.

**In their world we are all divided** – we are either sheep or goats – the deserving or the undeserving poor.

In this party we reject their division but understand this – if they persist in pursuing a politics of poison and division then the **Liberal Democrats will always be on the side of the weak, the dispossessed and the desperate**.

That is why I feel it to be both such a privilege and a responsibility to lead the Liberal Democrat Home Affairs team in parliament.

Week in, and week out, working with colleagues in the House of Lords and in the party across the country.

Brian Paddick, Sally Hamwee, Sarah Ludford, Jonathan Marks, Martin Thomas in the House of Lords.

Adrian Hyrylainen-Trett, Isabelle Parasram from outside parliament.

People like the formidable Suzanne Fletcher who for so long played such an important role in this party with Liberal Democrats for Seekers of Sanctuary.

And, of course, my own team in the Commons – Will Deans and Richard Wood and our indefatigable Home Affairs Advisor, Jonathan Jones.

A phenomenal team who **fight for liberal values day and daily at the heart of our nation's political life**.

The Conservatives may win the votes but they rarely win the arguments.

The United Kingdom has a long and proud history of helping people fleeing for their lives and they are on the wrong side of it"

Priti Patel and Boris Johnson want us to believe that everyone is as cruel and selfish as they are – but **they are wrong**.

The United Kingdom has a long and proud history of helping people fleeing for their lives and they are on the wrong side of it.

**They refuse to provide safe and legal routes for refugees to come here while introducing a Nationality and Borders Bill that denies asylum to those who do not come here legally.**

Orwell himself could not improve on that.

**Stopping those dangerous Channel crossings requires practical alternatives.** Resettlement programmes, family reunion routes and a new idea whose time has surely come: Humanitarian Visas that people can apply for abroad before coming to the UK safely to apply for refugee status.

Instead, Priti Patel presides over a Home Office that brainstorms ideas about fantasy islands to process the claims of refugees and asylum seekers, building floating walls in the sea or giant wave machines to blow refugees away from our coast.

Instead of these impractical, nasty ways of treating asylum seekers, govt must restore safe and legal routes for refugees – especially unaccompanied children. UK has a proud history of giving sanctuary to those in need. [@LibDems](#) will not let govt turn its back on them now. 2/2

– Alistair Carmichael MP (@amcarmichaelMP) [October 1, 2020](#)

I really wish I were making this stuff up but I am not.

And at the same time her new immigration rules deprive British business of the workforce that they need **to rebuild our economy**.

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The lorry drivers to supply our shops and supermarkets;

The workers for our care homes and hospitality industry;

If only they had done a bit of brainstorming on these issues they may have understood the foolishness of introducing a new immigration system **in the middle of a global pandemic**.

At the very least they must start listening to business now. Expand the Youth Mobility Scheme to EU citizens and scrap the arbitrary salary threshold that dismisses key workers as “unskilled”, so employers can recruit the workers they need to get us out of this crisis.

The law is always an imperfect reflection of the values we wish to see in our society, but **the way that we treat the most vulnerable among us speaks volumes about who we are as a country.**

So, too, does the way that we respond to crisis within our borders.

When the pandemic hit, liberals recognised the need for exceptional change in order to protect others, in spite of our concerns about civil liberties.

We are a liberal party, not a libertarian one.

We recognise that there must be a balance between our own rights and the potential harm to others.

That balance, however, has increasingly been tilted out of recognition by a **government that does not care for the rule of law and the rights of individuals** – unless they are at the top of that government.

One nameless Number 10 advisor described Boris Johnson as a “Stalinist” libertarian – he only wants freedom for himself!

“this government does not care for the rule of law and the rights of individuals”

When the Coronavirus Act first passed we supported it.

It was the right and responsible thing to do.

No one knew how the pandemic was going to play out and we knew that the government had to be ready for any eventuality.

When it came to be renewed, however, we were the first to stand for its repeal – because by that time it had become apparent that **the powers in that Act were disproportionate to the need.**

Worse still, they were ill-considered and confusing.

Since its introduction Crown Prosecution Figures show that there have been no fewer than **292 cases brought under the Act and not a single one brought correctly.**

**The overwhelming majority of the provisions have never been used** and the few that have been used – such as the fast track registration of medical professionals – are no longer needed.

Tory Ministers want MPs to hand them a blank cheque to use draconian powers they don't need.

We're voting no, and have tabled an amendment to replace the Coronavirus Act with [@LibertyHQ's #ProtectEveryone](#) Bill – which would protect both public health & human rights – instead.

[pic.twitter.com/ShzYHh7Rby](https://pic.twitter.com/ShzYHh7Rby)

– Liberal Democrats (@LibDems) [March 25, 2021](#)

But still the government insists on keeping the Act.

Why?

Well, it seems that is just what governments do.

When the citizens allow governments to take more control of their lives then governments are always slow to give them back.

It is why there will always be a need for a liberal party in British politics – a party that will **not be afraid to question authority** and which – in that contest between the citizen and the state, **will always be on the side of the citizen.**

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Strip away everything else this party does and stands for and that is what you find at our core – **a liberal party prepared to defend the rights and freedoms of the individual.**

That was why when Boris Johnson and his colleagues came forward with the idea of a vaccine ID card for people to get into nightclubs and big events we knew that this was an idea that had to be interrogated and contested.

It soon became apparent that this was a gimmick that would only make things worse.

It risked creating a false sense of security.

We know that, even amongst the fully vaccinated 40%, can still acquire and hence transmit the delta variant of the virus.

**There are no quick fixes when it comes to beating COVID.**

Vaccinate, vaccinate and vaccinate and, for those who are infected, test, trace and isolate. Get the basics right and give up on the quest for a quick fix or a silver bullet.

The very idea of COVID ID Cards opened the door to a **major redefinition of the relationship between the citizen and the state.**

Never before in peacetime had we allowed the government to control in this way where we could go, who with or what to do.

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**That was why we had to take the fight to the government – and we did – and we won.**

There was not a massive army of parliamentarians wanting to take on the case – there never is.

It took months of trying to get the issue onto the floor of the House of Commons but eventually we did.

The Speaker allowed us the time to raise it and the first brick was out the dam.

Five days later the whole scheme was swept away.

It wasn't done by any great whizz bang campaign technique or social media strategy.

**The COVID ID card scheme was defeated by Liberal Democrat MPs advancing liberal arguments in opposition to a Conservative government defined by their own arrogance and sense of entitlement.**

A government led by a Prime Minister who considers himself to be above the rule of law.

A government that **rules for the benefit of the elite.**

And whatever challenges present themselves in the weeks and months to come **we shall continue to take the fight to this government.**

We will offer them an opposition rooted in liberal values and liberal principles.

An opposition that seeks to **protect the rights and freedoms** of the individual.

An opposition that is respectful to others but which is never afraid to disagree with them and to stand up for what we believe in.

An opposition that has as its heart the creation of a fair, free and open society.

**A 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.**

That is still what this party is about and as long as we do not lose sight of that then we need never fear for our future.

Stick to our values.

Stick to our vision.

And great things can be possible.

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## [Let's ban conversion therapy](#)

A 2017 government survey found that almost 1 in 13 LGBT+ have been offered or had conversion therapy. This rises to 1 in 7 amongst transgender people. Over half of these conversion therapy practices are carried out by faith organisations.

As Liberal Democrats we champion the Individual right to privacy and autonomy. **This must include the right to medical autonomy for adults.**

Conversion therapy is incredibly harmful.

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It is a **predatory practice** which is able to take hold due to the ongoing social exclusion that the LGBT+ community faces every day. Conversion therapy **aims to suppress a person's gender identity or change their sexual orientation.**

NHS England has stated that conversion therapy has “no medical or therapeutic value”. It is essential we put a stop to this **abhorrent practice.**

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Today at our conference, members called on the Government for:

- **A criminal ban on conversion therapy** in all forms.
- **A criminal ban on referrals, transportations of minors overseas** and any advertising for forms of conversion therapy.
- **A campaign to raise awareness of the dangers of conversion therapy** among vulnerable people.

[Read our new policy in full](#)

Despite repeated promises, the Government has failed to put forward legislation which will end conversion therapy. We are calling on the Government to do more.

As liberals we must fight to build a free and fair society where everyone can

be themselves.

That's why we must end conversion therapy, once and for all.

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## [Setting out our vision for the country](#)

### **Setting out our vision for the country**

Our [September Federal Conference](#) has a key trio of debates on **our vision for a Liberal Democratic society, our overall policy platform and the strategy to give us the political power** to achieve those aims.

Having spent the first part of this Parliament fixing many of the practical organisational issues that caused so many problems in the 2019 general election, we now need to shift up a gear to get the external aspects right too. Sarah Green's victory in Chesham and Amersham is a wonderfully inspiring example of what we can achieve when we get this right. **The challenge is now to do that across the country.**

It's promising that we've seen **a sustained boost in our opinion poll ratings since Sarah's victory** (up from 7% on average this year before her victory to 9% since). There's also been a noticeable increase in our local council by-election performances since Sarah's victory and the easing of coronavirus-related restrictions on local campaigning. Local factors mean it's rarely wise to read too much into any one result, but the volume of by-elections – and their spread around the country – now means we look at that improvement with confidence that it's real.

So we can also approach these conference debates with confidence about our potential – **as long as we continue to up our game.**

### **Improving people's experience of being a member**

**Our party is our membership.** Giving people a good experience is crucial for growing, retaining and encouraging people to be active in our party. And enabling individuals to create the change they want to see in the world is at the heart of our liberal philosophy.

To help get our plans right for this, the Federal People Development Committee (FPDC) is doing telephone research calls to **understand the perspectives of ordinary members** on what works and what doesn't. If the random selector picks you out for a call, please do take part – and **if you have time to volunteer to help make the calls, [let me know](#)** and I can put you

in touch.

Alongside this, a variety of ideas are starting to be piloted, such as new ways of recruiting canvassed Lib Dems as members, a new quarterly cycle of briefing and feedback video calls for all local party officers, and the **special £1 registration fee for first-timers at Federal Conference**. I'm also [very happy to hear](#) any suggestions from you.

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## [Afghanistan](#)

**Global leaders should hang their heads in shame.**

We've all watched the heartbreaking scenes at Kabul Airport showing citizens of Afghanistan trying to escape from the terror of the Taliban. **Their situation is desperate.**

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## [Come to conference for just £1](#)

### **Only £1 to come to conference**

Our autumn federal party conference is being held online in September. **There's a brilliant offer for people who have not come to conference before: [you can register for just £1](#).**

**Conference will include an important trio of linked debates:** on our party's values, our policy platform and our strategy. Traditionally, we have debated these separately at conference, even years apart. But all three need to fit together in a coherent way – which is one of the lessons from the 2019 election post-mortem. So this time we're doing things differently.

The values and platform come from our Federal Policy Committee (FPC), while the strategy is being proposed by the Board. **It sets out the practical approach which is needed to grow our party and win more elections, securing us more political power to deliver on what we believe.**

Among the other conference items is also **the latest stage in developing our post-2019 European policy**, [which you can read about here](#).

As I [mentioned last month](#), the Board has also put in some important proposals for conference to decide on, including boosting our party bodies with an improved, simpler structure and set of rules. These come from the Party Body Review Group, which has run an extensive consultation with existing party bodies before drawing up the plans.

**The full conference agenda and reports to conference booklet [are both now out](#).**

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