

A new Magna Carta to save our country from Farage

There's a dark spectre hanging over British politics. The rise of Nigel Farage, Reform and their destructive brand of populism.

In my speech to conference, I said we have a moral responsibility to stop Reform and a historic opportunity to win big for our proud, liberal values.

It falls to us – the Liberal Democrats – to defend our values of decency, tolerance and respect for both individual freedom and the rule of law.

That's why I announced our call for a new Magna Carta for modern Britain. A written constitution – something our party has always believed in – to enshrine our hard-won rights and freedoms and defend them from Nigel Farage.

To stop him turning our great country into his version of Trump's America.



Our new Magna Carta would protect the rule of law, universal human rights and trial by jury. Freedom of expression, a free press – and the proud British and Liberal commitment to universal healthcare, free at the point of use – something else Farage wants to scrap.

But of course it's not just about defending the progress we've already made as a country. Our goal is to transform British politics for good.

So yes, our new Magna Carta would include proportional representation –

giving everyone equal power and an equal voice in our democracy.



Just like the original Magna Carta, this change won't come easily. We have to fight for it.

We have to save the United Kingdom we love from the triple threat of Nigel Farage, Donald Trump and Elon Musk.

And that starts with the elections in May – across England, Wales and Scotland. With your help, I know we can win big.

I can't wait to see you out there, on the doorsteps!

Read Ed's Full Speech:

What a wonderful weekend it's been – here in York.

It's hard to remember now, just how different things were – the last time we met here. Only two short years ago. We didn't know it, but we were just two months away from Rishi Sunak standing outside Number 10 – as he called that general election. Wishing he'd remembered his umbrella.

And I didn't know it, but I was just a few more weeks away from my first ever bungee jump! Life comes at you fast!

But I want to take a moment for us all – to reflect on everything we've achieved together since then. How far we've come. When I stood on this stage two years ago, we were still a party of just fifteen MPs. When I stood on this stage, I asked you to believe. That our party had something real to offer – and could come back after a decade of disappointment. To believe that knocking on doors in seats we'd never won before, wasn't a waste of your time – but an opportunity to win for our party and deliver for our country.

And you did it. You believed. You worked. And we won!

Every canvassing session. Every donation. Every leaflet through every letterbox. You've brought us here. Our 72 seats belong to you. Thank you.

Thank you for building us the strongest platform we've had for over 100 years. To take our party and our values to even greater success.

For now we have new challenges before us – even more urgent than the last.

But before I address the future, I want to talk about two former colleagues – two great Scots, two great Liberals – whose wisdom and friendship we will miss dearly. Jim Wallace and Ming Campbell.

Jim Wallace was one of the architects of Scottish devolution. A man who helped shape the Holyrood Parliament from its very first days. And of course, he was a great champion for Orkney and Shetland – and a man of deep faith and profound decency. And Jim was, for me, something else as well. He was the first Liberal Democrat MP I ever met. He gave me my first job in our party.

I would not be standing here today, without Jim Wallace. And I suspect there are many of us in this room who could say something similar – for he was a mentor, a guide, a steady hand at moments when we needed one. Jim devoted his life to public service, to his Christian faith, and to the cause of liberalism.

We miss him. We will always miss him.

And that loss sits alongside another. Because just a few months before we lost Jim, in September, we lost Ming Campbell. Another friend and our colleague – and of course our former leader. Two giants gone. Two men who, in their own ways, embodied what our party is at its best. Principled, compassionate, rooted in community, and always – always – in it for the right reasons. Two lives that should inspire everything we do from here.

I want to say more about Ming in a moment. But I think the best way to honour both of them – the best way to honour all those great Liberals who devoted their lives to our cause – is to remind ourselves what we are fighting for. What we'll always fight for.

The Britain we are trying to build.

Let me start with the simplest example of our cause. Something that sounds obvious but needs saying, out loud, because the times we're living in can make it easy to forget.

Things can get better. Not a slogan – a historical truth. The Liberal hope, optimism and reality others won't say.

You see, Britain has been through incredibly tough times in the past – and each time, Liberals have helped show the way through. The way forward. More than a century ago, a Liberal government introduced the state pension, health insurance and free school meals. And demolished trade barriers for our economy to grow. And then Liberals invented the NHS.

We fought for individual freedoms – decriminalising homosexuality and ending capital punishment. Legalising same-sex marriage and introducing shared parental leave. Championing civil liberties – from stopping the fingerprinting of children in schools to campaigning successfully for a Human Rights Act. And leading the work for the United Kingdom to look outwards – from our unswerving commitment to Europe and NATO to our global leadership on international development and climate change. Expanding renewable power and boosting funding for the poorest children at school.

We did those things. Our party did those things.

So to see both the values that drive us and our vision for the future, start with our record. And remember that – unlike Labour – we do not give in to the lazy assumption that the state always knows best. Instead, we start with people – with the intrinsic value and capability of every human being.

Our mission – as you have heard me say many times – is to empower people and to hold the already powerful to account. To give people the power and freedom to build their own lives.

For unlike the Conservatives and Reform, we know that true freedom is not just the absence of government. You are not free if you can't afford somewhere decent to live. You are not free if you can't get the care you need to lead a healthy, independent life. You are not free if you can't get a good education.

An active, effective state is not the enemy of freedom. Done right, it is the guarantor of freedom. In fact our party's constitution sets out our purpose so well. It's right here, on our membership card.

"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."

Fair, free and open. Liberty, equality and community. No one enslaved by poverty. No one enslaved by ignorance. No one enslaved by conformity.

What an amazing creed we all share. What a hopeful and ambitious vision for our country. What an incredible mission we are on together.

And with illiberal extremists on the march across the world, our Liberal mission has never been needed more than now. But a vision without a plan is just a con. And too many politicians in recent times have conned the British

people. Like the Brexiteers – the Conservatives and their partner in crime, Nigel Farage.

With their botched Brexit deal that's cost British businesses billions – and every British family thousands in higher tax. Not to forget the con job of Liz Truss's disastrous Mini-Budget. Applauded by Kemi Badenoch and Nigel Farage alike, as it crashed our economy and ended up not with tax cuts but even higher Conservative tax rises.

Then Labour promised to end that chaos. Remember?

What a con that's been – producing yet more tax rises and another government paralysed by in-fighting. And Keir Starmer – a Prime Minister who promised change but has proved so utterly out-of-touch. With such a catastrophic lack of judgement.

Different people. Same old con job.

And yet – Britain is not a country in decline. We are a great country being held back. We have world-class universities. Creative industries, life sciences and financial services that are the envy of the world. The third largest AI market on the planet.

Our task as a party is to show how we unlock that potential. Beginning with a growth plan that adds up.

And that starts – you've guessed it – by rebuilding our broken relationship with Europe. A new Customs Union. A youth mobility scheme. Going far faster and deeper than Labour's timid so-called reset.

Because every day we stick with this botched Brexit deal is another day British businesses pay more, export less, and fall further behind. And it's not just about trade, it's about innovation too.

Right now, too many brilliant British businesses – the kind that will define our economy in the decades to come – are being held back by a government that talks about technology but does nothing to help companies actually adopt it.

We will change that. With real, practical incentives to help small and growing businesses get the tools they need to compete. And as energy costs soar again – with yet another oil and gas price shock – we cannot keep leaving British industry dependent on the whims of foreign dictators and volatile global markets. We will accelerate our homegrown renewable energy, cut bills, and make British industry genuinely energy competitive.

That is the growth plan our country needs. A growth plan this government is disastrously lacking.

And let's remember why growth matters. It is not an end in itself. But without growth – far faster growth – the broken social contract can never be rebuilt. So we will use the dividends of growth where they are needed most. A big cut in the cost of living. Repairing the damage inflicted by Conservative and Labour tax rises, so people keep more of what they earn. A rescue plan

for the NHS. Fixing the social care crisis that's breaking families and breaking our health service along with them.

And rebuilding our independent national defence for our United Kingdom.

Conference, Donald Trump's war in Iran – now engulfing the whole Middle East – is not just a foreign policy crisis. For the UK, it's a test of who we are as a nation – and what we believe in. So let me say something as clearly as I can.

The Liberal Democrats stand with our brave Armed Forces. With the troops who have been put in the firing line by Trump's aggression and Iran's catastrophic response. And we also stand unambiguously for international law. For the protection of civilians. For a diplomatic path that even now could prevent this conflict from becoming something far, far worse.

We have seen missiles. Strikes and counter-strikes. Families – ordinary innocent families – caught in the crossfire of a conflict that nobody asked for and too few are trying hard enough to stop.

I think about those girls killed in their school in Minab. I think about the teenagers killed at their synagogue in Beit Shemesh. I think about all the children now huddled in bomb shelters under blackout, not knowing what comes next.

And I think about people's vulnerability. How quickly safety can be taken away. And how wars far away can hit everyone here in the United Kingdom too. Higher petrol prices. Increased mortgage payments. Rises in energy bills. Trump's war is already hitting families here – over £100 a year more in petrol alone.

Before energy bills rise. Before mortgage costs climb. The parent in rural Devon who has no choice but to drive. The home carer getting from patient to patient. The small business owner whose van is their office. The farmer who needs heating oil to get through winter. These are not abstractions. These are our neighbours. And they are already paying the price for a war they didn't start and they don't support.

Conference, I'm deeply worried about what higher energy bills later this year will mean for families and pensioners already on the edge. Hundreds of pounds more, just to keep the lights on and the radiators warm.

Because of Trump's war.

And in the middle of all of this – what did Kemi Badenoch and Nigel Farage choose to do?

Cheer on Trump.

Conservatives and Reform demanded the UK backed Trump's illegal, damaging war without question. Without a thought for how Trump's war would hurt British families and British pensioners with higher petrol, mortgage and energy bills. As Donald Trump argued rising oil and gas prices were "a very small

price to pay", Kemi Badenoch and Nigel Farage cheered in agreement. Their willingness to contract out British foreign policy – to sell out the well-being of the British people to Donald Trump – isn't patriotic, Conference. It's a betrayal.

A betrayal of every family in this country sitting round the kitchen table trying to work out how to make ends meet. The Conservative-Reform betrayal of Britain's national interest. Yet again – as they pander to their friend Donald Trump.

And let me be clear Conference. The Liberal Democrats did not cheer for this war. Liberal Democrats will not be silent about its costs. And we will fight – in Parliament, on the doorstep, and across the country – for the families now paying the price for Donald Trump's war.

Britain needs a party that's shown it will stand up to Donald Trump. For the British people.

Conference, be proud – we are the British political party standing up to Trump. Moments like this – these are exactly the moments when I think about what this party is made of.

And I think about Ming.

Because Ming understood, better than almost anyone, what it means to speak up in opposition to a foreign war when it is difficult. When the establishment is pointing in one direction and your conscience is pointing in another. Ming was our Foreign Affairs spokesperson when George Bush and Tony Blair went to war in Iraq in 2003. And Ming stood up – clearly, courageously, unequivocally – and said: this war is wrong. The legal basis doesn't exist. The intelligence is being manipulated.

He and Charles Kennedy stood together and said no.

History proved them right. History vindicated every word. Ming was often described as the best Foreign Secretary Britain never had. I think that is exactly right. And the best tribute we can pay to Ming's memory is to be the party he would recognise – one that speaks up, even when it is uncomfortable. That puts principle above convenience. That asks the hard questions, however unwelcome. Because that is what Liberals do.

We carry your example with us, Ming. We always will.

Because we know Britain can and must be a force for good in the world. Not a bystander. Not a commentator. A force for good. And that is what Liberals have always believed. What we believe today.

But being a force for good does not mean being naive. It means confronting the world, not as we'd like it to be, but as it is. So we believe in a strong Britain. A nation that our allies can count on, and one that our enemies dare not cross. Putin's war on Ukraine, and Trump's election in America, have changed the strategic landscape of Europe forever. We said so at the time, when others hedged. We were right.

The world is more dangerous – and that requires real investment in our armed forces, our intelligence services, our cyber defences, and the alliances that make collective security possible.

That's why the government must get on with it and raise defence spending to three per cent of GDP by 2030 at the latest. Why it should adopt our proposals for defence bonds to raise billions for our Armed Forces. Why it should lead on a European Rearmament Bank. Why it has to reverse the Conservative troop cuts that slashed the British Army to its smallest since the Napoleonic War. And why it must also reverse Labour and Conservative cuts to our Royal Navy that have left it smaller than any time since the English Civil War almost four centuries ago.

And there's something else we must confront about our critical national defences – in this time of Trump and MAGA making the United States such an unreliable ally.

Our party has always believed in an independent nuclear deterrent.

But today, the Trident missiles in our Vanguard subs are leased from the United States. Their maintenance depends on American facilities. And that means, the operability of our nuclear deterrent depends on the goodwill of whoever sits in the Oval Office.

A few years ago, that didn't feel like an issue. It certainly feels like one now. Our long-term commitment to multilateral disarmament is unchanged. But we must confront the world as it is. So Britain's nuclear deterrent must be genuinely, verifiably ours – not dependent on Trump or whoever his successor may be.

And as the UK now prepares to replace Trident in the twenty-forties, we should make the decision now to spend the billions required over the next two decades here in the UK, not in the US. Britain has the best scientists, the best engineers, the best builders in the world.

So let's get building our own capability to maintain our nuclear deterrent here in the UK. And in the long run, to manufacture our own, truly independent nuclear deterrent. Made in Britain.

But Conference, Liberals also know this: true national security is about more than just hardware. It is about alliances, standing, and respect in the world. Our Liberal friend, Mark Carney – who won Canada's election by standing up to Trump – put it best: "The power of legitimacy, integrity, and rules will remain strong – if we choose to wield it together." He's right, isn't he Conference?

The Conservatives spent years making Britain less safe by making Britain less trusted. Breaking international law, hollowing out our soft power, trashing our relationship with Europe. It was sabotage masquerading as patriotism.

Yet both the Conservatives and Reform are determined to isolate the United Kingdom still further. Conference, for the defence and security of our country, we cannot let them. And nor can we let other parties sabotage

Britain by taking us out of NATO. So reckless. So dangerous.

Our party offers something different. Defence rooted in values as well as capability. A Britain that is secure because it is respected, and respected because it is strong. That is the Liberal Britain I want us to build. But first, we must confront another threat that is much closer to home. The one that, in many ways, frightens us most. Because the greatest danger to the Britain we love does not come from Tehran or Moscow. It comes from within.

From a dark form of politics that wraps itself in the Union Jack while working to undermine everything that flag is supposed to represent. Nigel Farage. And Reform.

Farage does not want to solve Britain's problems. He needs them. He uses people's problems to fuel him, and his party – while offering no solutions. And the tragedy is, millions of people face real problems and are genuinely struggling. People who can't see a GP. Can't afford their energy bills. People who've seen their communities hollowed out. We must speak up for them – with real solutions.

In the way we've championed family carers. The daughters and sons, husbands and wives, brothers and sisters – looking after loved ones, keeping them out of hospital, holding the NHS together, and getting almost nothing in return. Forgotten, ignored and let down time and time again. There are so many people who feel the same way. They all deserve real answers. Real action. But what they're being offered by Reform is a man with a pint and a grievance – and no plan whatsoever. Another con man – like the failed former Conservatives who now stand behind him.

Strip away Farage's insults. Strip away the outrage. And there is nothing there. Every week another empty press conference – full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. Fawning over Trump. Willing – even eager – to echo the talking points of Vladimir Putin's murderous regime. These are not the actions of a man who loves our United Kingdom. They are the actions of a man who would sacrifice our proud British values to turn our country into his version of Trump's America.

Let me say it plainly, Conference. Nigel Farage is no patriot. He's a con man. And Reform is just his latest big grift. Because the values that Farage and his cronies seek to undermine – democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law – these are not just some niche luxuries. They are the foundations of our United Kingdom.

And those foundations have a name, and a date, and a meadow beside the Thames where they were first laid down. 800 years ago, at Runnymede, a group of barons forced a despotic King to accept something radical: that power was not absolute. That even the most powerful are bound by the rule of law. That some rights are inalienable. And that the power of government rests in the consent of the governed. All embodied in Magna Carta. The Great Charter. Another of England's great inventions. And one of our greatest exports.

If Donald Trump were ever to walk down the street from the White House and

visit the National Archives – Perhaps to read the constitution, and see what it says about running for a third term – If he went to America's National Archives, the very first document he would see is Magna Carta. Democracy. Individual liberty. And the rule of law. These are British values. Genuinely, historically, proudly British.

Not imported. Not imposed. Asserted, by us and for us. Ours.

And let's be clear-eyed Conference. When Farage and Reform threaten the democratic rights of those who don't vote for them... When they go after individual judges who don't rule in their favour... When they treat the rule of law as an inconvenience to be swept aside... They are not defending our United Kingdom. They are betraying it.

They are taking a sledgehammer to the very foundations that Magna Carta laid down eight centuries ago. And when they cosy up to Donald Trump – a man who has shown open contempt for democracy, who treats allies as servants and the rule of law as beneath him – They are not making Britain great. They are trying to turn it into Trump's America. That is not patriotism. That is its opposite. It is a force that threatens to tear our great country apart, and we cannot let it.

So today, I want to call for something bold. Something that this moment demands and this party is uniquely placed to champion.

A new Magna Carta for modern Britain.

Not a literal rewriting of an 800-year-old document – but a renewed national commitment, enshrined in law, to the values that have always made Britain worth defending. The rule of law, with the courts always independent of political interference. A commitment to universal human rights, that cannot be ripped up at the whim of a populist like Farage. Trial by jury. Yes, still a fundamental right that we hold dear. A democracy that is transparent, accountable, and resistant to the authoritarian creep we see in other countries. And resistant to authoritarian creeps like Donald Trump.

And it should go much further than the old Magna Carta, to enshrine the rights we have asserted over generations since. A free press. Genuinely free. Freedom of expression. And yes, that means on social media too. The proud British and Liberal commitment to universal healthcare, free at the point of use – something else Farage wants to scrap.

And while we're at it, let's go further – to not just defend our democracy but strengthen it for the future: Protecting our democracy from foreign interference – whether that's Donald Trump or Vladimir Putin. Chinese spies or Elon Musk. And yes, Conference, giving everyone equal power and an equal voice, through proportional representation.

A new Magna Carta for modern Britain. A written constitution to protect our rights and freedoms. To defend our country from Farage and Reform.

To hold the powerful to account and give everyone real power.

Friends, Magna Carta was not given to the people of this country. They fought for it. And if we want to keep what it stands for, we will have to fight for it again.

Our party will always be up for that fight.

We are the party that says: we did not inherit this democracy by accident, and we will not surrender it through complacency. That's what this fight is about, Conference. And we have to win. For our values. And for our country. Right now, we have a Labour government with an enormous majority that has wasted its chance for change.

A Conservative Party that proved it was unfit for government, and is now proving it is unfit for opposition too.

And Reform and the Greens offering only anger and bluster, instead of answers.

In that landscape, the Liberal Democrats are not just important – we are essential. We are the party of hope. The party that believes the best of Britain rather than the worst. The party that says: yes, things are hard, and the problems are real – but we can fix them, together, because the British people always have.

So what we face ahead of us is this: a moral responsibility to win, to stop Reform; and a historic opportunity to win, for the Liberal Britain people need. At the last election, we had a strategy focused on winning. And we won more seats than any time in our party's history. Since then, we have won hundreds more seats in councils across England. And that's why in May, I know we will win big again – across England, Wales and Scotland. It's a shame I can't bet on it.

But to be fair, I do have insider knowledge. I've seen you at work. I've sat in the church halls and village pubs and community centres where our councillors and MPs and volunteers are doing the quiet, unglamorous work of rebuilding trust. Doing what our unique brand of community politics is all about: listening to people. Really listening. Showing up, year after year. And caring – truly caring about people, about the places they live, about the country we love. That's how we win. That's how we beat the populists and deliver for our communities.

And I have knocked on enough doors to know that when people look you in the eye and say they've had enough – enough of being lied to, taken for granted, told to put up with a politics that never improves their lives – they are ready for something different. We are that something different. Not because we are perfect, but because our values are right. And because we see them.

The mother struggling to get her child a mental health appointment. The young couple priced out of a home. The small business owner wondering why no one in government is on their side. We do not offer a slogan or a scapegoat. We offer a plan. And we offer a party that will always, always show up.

Conference, there is a future for Britain that I can see clearly. Fair, free

and open. Where hard work is rewarded and aspiration is real. Secure at home and respected abroad. A country that tells its children: whoever you are, wherever you are from – here you can succeed and thrive. The Britain that Jim Wallace and Ming Campbell devoted their lives to building. That all of us here are determined to build.

A Britain that is worth every door knocked, every leaflet delivered, and yes – every bungee jump completed. That Britain is possible. It is not a fantasy. It is a choice.

A choice between hope and fear.

Between opening ourselves up and closing ourselves off. Between becoming Trump's America – and being proudly, defiantly, eccentrically British.

The Liberal Democrats choose hope. We choose openness.

We choose the Britain that we love and the values that we share.

And we will fight – with everything we have – for the country we know is possible.

Thank you!

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Author:

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Lyons – Ulster's ties with the US stronger than ever

Communities Minister Gordon Lyons has hailed the enduring links between Northern Ireland and the United States and the increased focus this St Patrick's Day on the contribution of people from Ulster.

Local Government Finance Emergency

Our local councils are the front line of our democracy. From social care and schools to housing and bin collections, they provide the essential services that hold our communities together. But today, after years of Conservative neglect and a lack of seriousness from the new Labour Government to tackle the financial crisis in local government head-on, our councils are in survival mode.

Since 2018, seven councils in England have been forced to admit they cannot meet their spending commitments, and in the last year alone, 30 councils required emergency government bailouts. **This emergency threatens the local services we all rely on.**

Today, our members passed a policy calling for an end to the sticking plaster approach, demanding a fair, long-term funding settlement for every community.

A System at Breaking Point

For too long, central government has handed down deep cuts while piling on more pressure. Councils are facing a perfect storm:

- **The Social Care Crisis:** Skyrocketing costs in adult and children's social care are draining budgets, forcing cuts of up to 70% in other vital areas.
- **The SEND Funding Gap:** The high needs deficit in Dedicated Schools Grants (DSG) for SEND is estimated to hit a staggering £5 billion this year.
- **The Housing Crisis:** The Conservative and Labour failure to boost the building of social homes and with councils spending more and more on temporary accommodation and central government subsidising less and less.
- **Deprivation vs. Funding:** Shockingly, the areas with the highest levels of poverty – those that need local services the most – have often seen the deepest cuts to their grants.
- **Outdated Taxation:** We are still using a Council Tax system which bears little relation to actual local need or demand for services.

Our Plan to Save Local Services

We cannot afford to let our councils fail. The Liberal Democrats are calling on the Government to move past emergency bailouts and deliver a sustainable future for local government:

- **Real-Term Funding Increases:** A sustained increase in core funding to help councils keep pace with inflation and a growing, ageing population.
- **Fixing the SEND Deficit:** A dedicated, long-term funding solution for the high-needs education deficits that are currently bankrupting school budgets.
- **A Fair Funding Review:** Implementing a needs-based system that ensures money goes where it is needed most, with full protections so no council faces destabilising year-on-year losses.
- **A Comprehensive Review:** Fully review how we fund local government to ensure a fair, sustainable, multi-year settlement that allows councils to properly plan for the future.

Read our new policy in full

Leading the Way

Despite these impossible financial hurdles, Liberal Democrat councillors and leaders across the country are innovating every day to protect their residents. It's no wonder that in 2025 we won more council by-elections than any other party – people trust us to deliver for their local area.

But innovation can only go so far when the bank is empty. It is time for the Government to stop the managed decline of our communities and provide the investment our councils need to drive economic growth and build the affordable housing our country deserves.

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