

## Writing Motions for Liberal Democrat Conference

### Length

While there are no specific word limits laid down in standing orders, they do state that emergency motions must be 'brief' and the Conference Committee generally doesn't like overlong motions. As a rule of thumb the Committee will look less favourably on an emergency motion which is more than 250 words or a policy motion that is over 500 words.

### Style and content

Motions should be written in as concise a style as possible. It is a temptation, particularly for subjects on which you are well informed, to throw in the kitchen sink in terms of examples, facts and figures, however these should be kept to a minimum. Unless a motion is intended to be purely of ephemeral interest, it is best to avoid putting in a lot of specific numbers which are liable to be overtaken by the next set of data. If quotations are included then they should be kept short. References to reports, White Papers, draft bills etc. should be written on the assumption the audience haven't read them and some basic explanation is needed.

Please check that any factual points are accurate. Motions on potentially debatable subjects often fall by the wayside because of simple inaccuracy. You can't expect the Conference Committee to do your fact-checking for you. Do not rely on a single source, especially if it is a newspaper article or a campaign group statement. A good source of information on many topical political issues is the set of House of Commons Library Research Papers available online at <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/research/research-papers/>

The positive recommendations are the most important part of the motion and what you should give most thought to. A common reason for motions not being selected is that they contain a lot of criticisms and a detailed description of the problem but are thin, unclear or entirely negative in their conclusions. Concision applies to policy recommendations too – it is usually better to stick to a few substantial points which make for a coherent plan and not bother with a long list of tinkering little changes.

Although it is appropriate to use some political rhetoric, the Conference Committee will tend to strike out very florid language and lines which are really just debating points. You should refrain from imputing sinister motives or indulging in personal attacks. Remember that the Party Conference is not privileged in terms of the law of defamation.

### Structure

A way of thinking about writing your motion is to have in mind a fourfold structure:

1. Description of the issue or problem which the motion seeks to address.
2. The Liberal Democrat principle(s) which underlie the solution.
3. Highlighting Coalition Government policies or existing Liberal Democrat policies which will contribute to the solution.
4. The further policy proposals which normally conclude the motion and are its most important element.

Unless any of these sections can be stated in a single sentence, it is normal to break down each section of the motion into a series of numbered or lettered points. This aids clarity and also makes it easier to deal with amendments later. There can in practice be more than one list of points under each of these sections.

The preamble or introduction should describe the issue being addressed by the motion, usually using words such as Conference "notes", "is concerned by" or "regrets". The motion can then "believe", "reaffirm", "recognise", "declare" or just list the principles that apply. Any positive government action on the issue, especially that which is due to Liberal Democrat influence in the Coalition Agreement or initiatives by Liberal Democrat Ministers, can be "welcomed", or "approved". Proposals are usually introduced by "calls for", "calls on the Government to" or even "calls on the Liberal Democrat Ministers to

press within Government for”, but could also follow from “recommends”, “proposes”, “urges”, “demands”, “insists”, or “resolves”.

Please note that under the party constitution elected representatives cannot be mandated. You should therefore avoid language like “Conference requires Liberal Democrat MPs/Ministers to abolish Christmas Day”. Something like “Conference calls on Liberal Democrat Ministers to work within the Coalition Government for the abolition of Christmas Day” would be better drafting.

In enumerating points, the final set of proposals should be listed 1.,2.,3. etc. Previous sections should alternate between different styles of letters and numbers. For example:

Conference notes with concern:

- A.
- B.
- C.

Conference reaffirms the Liberal Democrat commitment to:

- i)
- ii)
- iii)

Conference welcomes the Coalition Government’s decision to:

- a)
- b)
- c)

Conference calls on Liberal Democrat Ministers to press within Government for:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Do not list points using bullet points.

## **Motions and Papers**

If a motion is accompanying a formal party policy paper from the FPC, the motion will explicitly seek approval of the whole content of the paper – eg. “Conference endorses policy paper 82 *Zero Carbon Britain* as a comprehensive statement of the party’s policies on climate change. In particular conference welcomes the proposals to....” Motions based on spokespersons’ papers cannot be used to endorse the whole paper, only points specifically mentioned in the motion. The motion can say something like “Conference notes the Spokesperson’s Paper *All for the best in best of all possible worlds* and in particular endorses its proposals to.....”

## **State/Federal Applicability**

Motions to the Federal Conference should be on topics that are of UK or England-wide relevance, or at the very least of interest to more than one region of England. Local or even regional issues for one English region will generally be ruled out as too parochial. Obviously the Federal Conference should not be debating devolved Scottish, Welsh or Northern Ireland issues.

The motion should have a statement of the intended Federal or State applicability appended to it. Motions may be Federal, England and Wales or England only. Some may be hybrid, mixing Federal and State points. If so you should include a note along the following lines:

*Applicability: Federal, except for calls for points 1, 3 and 6 which are England only.*

It is more important to cover the substantive proposals than any preamble.

### **What does the Conference Committee look for when selecting motions?**

Aside from all the points on drafting covered above, other things being equal a motion is more likely to be selected by the Conference Committee if:

- It contains genuinely new and interesting proposals
- It is on a subject where we don't have much policy and which hasn't been debated at conference recently
- It is on a subject of high political salience
- It is likely to lead to an interesting debate – that is it is likely to attract amendments and speakers both for and against

It is less likely to be selected by the Conference Committee if:

- It is just a rehash of old policies with nothing really new
- It is on a subject which has been debated recently
- It is on a subject where we expect an official policy paper at the next couple of conferences
- It is unlikely to lead to a good debate, for example if it is so uncontroversial that no one will want to disagree with anything in the motion

### ***Example: a relatively well drafted motion from September 2010 Conference***

#### **Green Taxation**

Conference believes that a key step in creating an environmentally sustainable economy is to establish a system of taxation which rewards activities which are non-polluting and resource efficient, achieved through a gradual switch from taxation on income and employment to taxation on pollution and resource depletion.

Conference notes and approves the commitments in the Coalition Programme for Government to:

- a) Increase the proportion of tax revenue accounted for by environmental taxes.
- b) Reform the taxation of air travel by switching from a per-passenger to a per-plane duty.
- c) Introduce a floor price for carbon.

Conference applauds the inclusion in the June 2010 Emergency Budget of commitments to reform the Climate Change Levy and to explore options for changes to aviation tax.

Conference calls on Liberal Democrat ministers in the coalition government to:

1. Press for rapid implementation of the reform of the Climate Change Levy so as to steadily increase the price of fossil-fuel-consuming activities and to promote energy efficiency measures and the development of renewable energy.
2. Ensure that any changes to the carbon price do not result in windfall benefits to the operators of existing nuclear power stations.
3. Press for full and rapid implementation of the coalition's commitment to reform the taxation of air travel.
4. Insist that the Government should set a target of securing not less than 10% of its revenue from environmental taxes by 2015, thus positioning the UK amongst the better performing members of the EU.

*Applicability: Federal.*

## **Example: a poorly drafted motion**

### **Teddy Bears' Picnics**

Conference is horrified at the reckless and irresponsible behaviour of teddy bears during picnics they have been holding with increasing frequency in the Hundred Acre Wood.<sup>1</sup>

Conference notes that according to what we've heard in the saloon bar of the Dog and Duck<sup>2</sup>, these so-called picnics have taken place on April 1<sup>st</sup>, April 31<sup>st3</sup>, May 3<sup>rd</sup>, May 9th, May 21<sup>st</sup>, June 5<sup>th</sup>, June 14<sup>th</sup>, June 29th and July 2<sup>nd</sup>. There may be many other incidents of which we are not aware.<sup>4</sup>

Conference further notes that these outrageous episodes have involved<sup>5</sup>:

- Unlicensed musical performances
- Unlicensed dancing
- Underage consumption of ginger beer (except we're not sure what counts in teddy years)
- Dropping of crumbs, apple cores, banana skins, and half-eaten sweets
- Straying off approved footpaths
- Playing of boisterous and potentially dangerous games including but not only :
  - i) tag
  - ii) hopscotch
  - iii) 'Simon Says'
  - iv) pat-a-cake
  - v) hide and seek; and
  - vi) blind man's buff

Conference believes that their outrageous and anti-social conduct represents a major threat to the natural environment, public order and world peace.<sup>6</sup>

Conference further believes that this is evidence of a sinister conspiracy by pro-European elements in the Government including the Home Secretary and the Minister for Woodlands to flood the South East of England with teddy bears of German origin.<sup>7</sup>

Conference commends Councillor Fenton-Black's campaign against this scourge and endorses his 500 page report *For You the Picnic is Over, Teddy*.<sup>8</sup>

Conference therefore demands that Nick Clegg and other Liberal Democrats Ministers make the establishment of a Royal Commission on this subject the number one priority for the Coalition Government<sup>9</sup> and that the Federal Policy Committee commission a Liberal Democrat Policy Working Group.<sup>10</sup>

### **Comments**

1. On a local not a national issue.
2. Not well sourced.
3. Factually impossible – there is no April 31<sup>st</sup> in the calendar.
4. Too much detail in this section.
5. Too much detail in this section.
6. Over the top rhetoric.
7. Attributing motives, unsubstantiated allegations, personal attacks.
8. Inviting conference to endorse something hardly anyone will have read.
9. Seeking to mandate elected representatives.
10. Having described the problem in apocalyptic terms, there is a very weak final recommendation for a Royal Commission and a working group. Unclear what the relative timing and relationship of the Royal Commission and the party working group might be.

Also, there is no statement of what Liberal Democrat principles the motion might be intended to apply.