



**POLICY
PAPER 165**
DEFENDING
DEMOCRACY

Policy Paper 165



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1 Introduction	2
Executive Summary	5
2 We will tackle undue influence: regulation and enforcement	7
2.1 Undue influence of foreign states	7
2.2 Undue influence of big business and billionaires	9
2.3 Enforcement	12
3 We will build greater democratic resilience: giving ordinary people more power through fair representation, stronger local government and combatting vulnerabilities	14
3.1 A Codified Constitution	14
3.2 Fair Representation	15
3.3 Local Democracy and Devolution	17
3.4 Media	19
3.5 Promoting informed citizenship	20
3.6 Radicalisation	22

1 Introduction

1.0.1 Democracy in Britain is under threat. Foreign states and foreign billionaires are seeking to use money and media interference to unduly influence British politicians and British elections. It is far too easy for the rich and powerful in Britain to wield disproportionate political influence and to get around systems that are supposed to prevent the buying of elections.

1.0.2 At the same time, the rapid rise of new technologies makes it easier for misinformation from malign actors to spread fear and confusion, stirring up racial hatred and moral panic.

1.0.3 Populism feeds on cynicism about existing democratic institutions. It is deeply worrying that the turnout at the last general election was only 59% when it was as high as 78% in 1992. Many people feel excluded and that their voices are not heard or listened to. Democracy in Britain today is not as representative as it should be, and power is over centralised. There have been far too many corruption scandals which undermine faith in politics. Trust in the established two party duopoly is at an all-time low, with only about a third of voters in the 2026 English local elections supporting Labour and Conservative combined – a reality that is not matched by a political system to support multi-party politics.

1.0.4 Liberal Democrats are determined to defend and to strengthen democracy in Britain. We want to put as much power as possible in the hands of ordinary people, and limit unjustified accumulations of power by vested interests.

1.0.5 We will address these problems by tackling undue influence head on, and by building the resilience of individual citizens and communities, giving people the power to make informed choices about their own lives and to see their choices fairly reflected in the actions of government at all levels.

1.0.6 Firstly, we will strengthen the rules and institutions meant to protect the system from abuse. This means reforming political spending and donations, and increasing the powers of the Electoral Commission, establishing a new police unit embedded in the National Crime Agency, specifically dedicated to tackling corruption and criminal behaviour within Westminster and Whitehall. We will ban anyone who has served as a political appointee in a foreign administration from donating to UK political parties, think tanks, or campaign groups, and prohibit politicians from promoting or advertising specific financial products such as cryptocurrencies, stocks, and commodities like gold. We will update the rules that apply to the media, and regulate it differently so that the rules keep pace with the realities of its new forms and functions in our democratic life.

1.0.7 Secondly and even more importantly, we need to inject more vigour into our democratic life. A codified written constitution is needed to guard against overcentralisation and executive overreach, and to give normal people the power to understand and defend our democracy on the basis of a shared understanding of the values, rights and processes that underpin it. We will reform the voting system so that every vote counts – and counts equally; and make it easier for people who are entitled to vote to do so. We will shift power from the centre to communities, and strengthen the power of local communities to take control of their own destinies. We will put more resources into civic education and local

democratic participation initiatives. We will also address radicalisation at the community level, achieving a more impactful balance of engagement and security-focused interventions.

1.0.8 This paper sets out in more detail Liberal Democrat plans for a more democratic Britain.

Executive Summary

Our key proposals to defend and enhance democracy in the UK include:

- Introducing proportional representation by Single Transferable Vote for Westminster elections and local elections in England.
- Establishing a Constitutional Convention to agree a codified constitution for the UK.
- Introducing a donation cap on individual donations, and an annual donation cap on individuals, including for gifts to politicians, with a Royal Commission to develop specific figures; the Commission should also consider its approach to corporate donations.
- Prohibiting anyone who has served as a political appointee in a foreign administration in the last ten years from donating to UK political parties.
- Devolving more fiscal and economic power to local authorities.
- Commissioning a second Leveson-type review of media regulation, covering new media in addition to traditional broadcast and print media, recognising that the media scene has evolved significantly since the original Leveson Inquiry reported in 2012.
- Setting up a police unit embedded in the National Crime Agency, specifically dedicated to tackling corruption and criminal behaviour within Westminster and Whitehall, including criminal breaches of electoral law.
- Increasing the public funding available to civil society organisations who can play a role in citizenship education, including political media literacy – including the creation of a long-term, ringfenced Community Democratic Resilience Fund to support youth services, training for educators and parents, and local democratic participation initiatives.

- Strengthening citizenship education in primary and secondary schools, with a greater focus on political and media literacy; and elevating the academic status of Citizenship GCSE.
- A full overhaul of Prevent including the delivery of a new counter-radicalisation programme – a community-led engagement strategy focused on supporting the most vulnerable to minimise their exposure to pathways towards violent extremism and to meet the challenges of today's threats.

2 We will tackle undue influence: regulation and enforcement

2.1 Undue influence of foreign states

2.1.1 There are many factors that have led to the erosion of public trust in our politics, but the often invisible hand of foreign states is the most significant cause.

2.1.2 Securing the integrity of our democracy is vital to our national security and should be prioritised and resourced accordingly. Hostile foreign states use both political funding and disinformation to manipulate political outcomes. The Intelligence and Security Committee's 2020 Russia Report concluded that British politics and the economy are targets, with evidence of widespread Russian interference, including disinformation, cyberattacks, and using Russian oligarchs to channel money and influence, with the government underestimating the threat.

2.1.3 This threat is not posed by the Russian state alone: there is clear evidence of malign interference by other foreign powers such as China, whose actions threaten our democracy to a degree that is not currently acknowledged.

2.1.4 The Rycroft Report has identified attempts by foreign actors to directly infiltrate our politics by gaining direct leverage over political parties and political process, and attempts to create division and distrust among the wider public through activity on social media and other channels, as major threats to democratic integrity.

2.1.5 Our national sovereignty is on the line - and our aggressors have a clear and well-resourced agenda.

2.1.6 Policy Proposals:

- Assigning clear responsibility at ministerial and Senior Civil Service (SCS) levels for combating foreign political interference, with resources commensurate to the challenge this poses to our democracy.
- Strengthening the existing Foreign Influence Registration Scheme (FIRS) and broadening the list of countries on the enhanced tier list.
- Prohibiting anyone who has served as a political appointee in the central government of a foreign state in the last ten years from donating to UK political parties.
- Require think tanks and campaign groups to publicly declare their sources of funding, as part of their regular reporting to Companies House and/or the Charities Commission.
- Conducting a standalone review into the extent of US interference in British politics, including the extent to which known British extremists are being actively supported by the White House.
- Requiring candidates for national elected office to declare any past or current income or gifts from any government on the FIRS enhanced tier list or from any person or organisation connected to that government.
- Working with democratic partners in the EU and the Council of Europe and other trusted allies worldwide for a convention or treaty to combat disinformation and electoral interference, supplemented by an annual conference and Counter-Disinformation Fund, to safeguard and promote democracy at home as well as abroad.

- Working towards radical real-time transparency for political advertising, donations and spending, including an easily searchable public database of all online political adverts.
- Introducing new legal protections for whistleblowers through a dedicated Office of the Whistleblower.

2.2 Undue influence of big business and billionaires

2.2.1 Our democracy should not be for sale to the highest bidder: every vote should count, and count equally. And yet, often powered by assertive foreign actors, our democracy is now being undermined by an unprecedented level of money flowing through – and around – our regulated pathways for donations and spending. The extent to, and ways in which, we regulate and enforce political donations and spending are no longer fit for purpose.

2.2.2 The influence of big money is, in part, visible. For the year leading up to the 2024 General Election, £94.5 million – the highest amount of campaign spending ever – was declared by political parties, according to the Electoral Commission. The higher the level of spending, the greater the advantage given to those with the deepest pockets. Given that most party fundraising comes not from large numbers of small donors but a small number of very large donors, the ability to fundraise does not necessarily reflect the overall degree of support a party enjoys in the electorate

2.2.3 The last Conservative government opened the door to this increase, by increasing the total campaign spending limit to £34.1 million, nearly double the previous cap. At the same time, they increased the level at which donations have to be individually reported. These changes clearly represented an attempt to give themselves an advantage over less

well-funded opponents: the result was to give an advantage to any political party with access to big money.

2.2.4 Even greater political influence can be bought through invisible means; that is to say, where regulatory loopholes are exploited by big business and billionaires pouring money into unregulated or lesser regulated communications and campaigning channels. Technology advancements have increased the number, complexity and political efficacy of these channels. Our political funding rules have not kept pace.

2.2.5 Additionally, one of the major factors driving the decline in the public's trust in our democratic politics is the widespread perception that politicians are 'all the same'. We need to combat this by challenging the deeply entrenched belief that elected representatives are self-serving and putting their own personal and financial gain before the public interest.

2.2.6 To address the twin challenges of buying influence and selling action, we will introduce a more assertive regime around money in politics, a radical increase in transparency and urgent measures to reduce conflicts of interest.

2.2.7 Policy proposals:

- Introducing a total year-round cap on political spending by political parties.
- Introducing a donation cap on individual donations, and an annual donation cap on individuals, including for gifts to politicians, with a Royal Commission to develop specific figures; the Commission should also consider its approach to corporate donations.

- Updating spending limit rules to mandate political parties to fund any staff costs within these limits.
- Introducing national spending limits for the regulated period of local elections to close a potential loophole.
- Indexing all political spending limits to a measure of inflation.
- Updating third-party campaigning legislation, including the application of donation limits and year round reporting requirements to any organisation or individual for whom a principle activity is to influence voting intentions.
- A full ban on political donations made in cryptoassets.
- Requiring candidates to make declarations of interest when nominations are submitted, well in advance of polling day, subject to necessary safeguards to prevent harassment.
- Strengthening Know Your Donor requirements, in the spirit of the Know Your Customer (KYC) due diligence provisions in anti-money laundering regulations.
- Radical real-time transparency for political advertising, donations and spending, including an easily searchable public database of all online political adverts.
- Strengthening and extending lobbying regulation to include in-house lobbyists.
- Ensuring that a record of all lobbying of Ministers via instant messages, emails, letters and phone calls is published as part of quarterly transparency releases; and that all communications, including on WhatsApp are retained.
- Bringing reporting standards for the List of Ministers' Interests in line with the House of Commons Register of Members' Interests, so that publication takes place more frequently.
- Banning elected Members of Parliament from abusing their position and profile to promote financial services and products.

- Making the role of the Independent Adviser on Ministerial Standards truly independent by putting the role on a statutory basis and giving Parliament the power to appoint them.
- Introducing legal punishments by default for ministers who break the ministerial code – and extending this code to other equivalent public figures such as ambassadors – supported by a new police unit embedded in the National Crime Agency (NCA), specifically dedicated to tackling corruption and criminal behaviour within Westminster and Whitehall.
- Allowing peers who have committed serious misconduct, including corrupt use of their office, to be expelled without specific legislation. This should go hand in hand with an elected second chamber.

2.3 Enforcement

2.3.1 Changes in the 2022 Elections Act have weakened the independence of the Electoral Commission; and both local authorities and police forces have historically been ill-positioned and under-resourced to ensure the enforcement of electoral law. Today's enforcement mechanisms do not allow for quick action during time-limited regulated periods. It is essential that there is a commensurate concentration of resource and expertise at the national level to deal with the complex instances of criminal breach of electoral law, particularly where that involves suspicion of illicit foreign financing that might require investigation of financial dealings beyond these shores.

2.3.2 Any changes in the regulation of undue influence in our politics will be matched by clear accountability for enforcement from the most appropriate authority, supported by the resources to do it.

2.3.3 Policy proposals:

- Setting up a dedicated national policing unit within the National Crime Agency (see above), specifically dedicated to tackling corruption and criminal behaviour within Westminster and Whitehall, including criminal breaches of electoral law.
- Protecting and strengthening the independence of the Electoral Commission, following Conservative attempts to undermine it.
- Extending the information-sharing powers of the Electoral Commission, so that it can not only share information with other agencies, but also require information from them.
- Ensuring the sentencing associated with each criminal offence matches the seriousness of the offence. This will unlock vital statutory thresholds, allowing the police and security services to deploy a wider range of covert investigative techniques, such as intrusive surveillance governed by the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act (RIPA). Given the complex, international, and potentially state-sponsored nature of current and future electoral finance abuse, investigators must not be structurally barred from using the standard tools required to dismantle this organised crime.
- Strengthening electoral finance law by providing that an offence is committed if a defendant suspected, or had reasonable grounds to suspect, that they were facilitating an impermissible donation, making a false declaration, or otherwise violating financial controls as stipulated within electoral law (PPERA).

3 We will build greater democratic resilience: giving ordinary people more power through fair representation, stronger local government and combatting vulnerabilities

3.1 A Codified Constitution

3.1.1 We need an urgent Constitutional Convention to enshrine fundamental shared British values, rights and freedoms in a new codified constitution. This will act as the first line of defence against the multiple threats we face to our democracy. A written, codified constitution will cover all four nations of the United Kingdom, while recognising the distinct constitutional status of the Crown Dependencies and British Overseas Territories and setting out the principles governing their relationship with the Crown and the UK Government.

3.1.2 Once agreed by the Constitutional Convention, the new constitution will be 'entrenched'; that is to say it cannot be changed by simple Act of Parliament.

3.1.3 The constitution will include:

- The powers of the Prime Minister, Cabinet and ministers.
- The powers of Parliament.
- The relative powers of the Central UK government and the nations and regions.

- Giving everyone equal power in our democracy through proportional representation.
- Protecting our democracy from foreign interference.
- Ensuring that our elections are run and regulated by an independent body, in perpetuity.
- Entrenching the UK's commitment to the European Convention on Human Rights.
- Codifying other checks and balances on executive power such as our independent judiciary and the right to protest.

3.2 Fair Representation

3.2.1 The UK's current political system is unrepresentative, outdated and protects vested interests. The First Past the Post (FPTP) system results in gross disproportion between the number of votes given to a party and the number of seats it wins. Indeed, the 2024 General Election was the most disproportional in history. Labour won 63% of MPs with just 34% of the vote, and we have seen the chaos and instability that has caused.

3.2.2 The impact of FPTP goes far beyond the lottery of election results. It disenfranchises voters. It promotes adversarial and polarising politics, including political campaigns that focus on discrediting opponents rather than setting out positive proposals for the good of the country. It leads to a lack of diversity in the pools of both candidates and elected representatives.

3.2.3 And perhaps most importantly, it fails to deliver results on the issues that voters most care about. We have majority agreement on some of the most pressing challenges this country faces, from health and social care to the environment. And yet FPTP has failed to address these issues with programmes of delivery (and proven outcomes) that reflect the

prevailing consensus. If we are to fix the country, we must fix politics. That means moving to systems of proportional representation at every level of government, in every nation.

3.2.4 Meanwhile there are other archaic aspects of our democratic systems that also erode trust: that the House of Lords remains entirely unelected, and that political power remains highly centralised in Westminster and Whitehall, are democratic anomalies with wide-ranging impact.

3.2.5 To make matters worse, too many of our democratic processes are designed to protect a two-party system of so-called 'broad church' coalitions that no longer reflects the public vote, nor the public interest: for example, the power of the Prime Minister to call elections at a time of their choosing gives the incumbent party a clear tactical advantage. The increasing fragmentation of party politics in the UK is only likely to make the inadequacy of these processes even more evident – and to further erode public trust and confidence in our politics.

3.2.6 Policy proposals:

- Introducing proportional representation by the Single Transferable Vote for electing Westminster MPs and local councillors in England.
- Scrapping the Conservatives' voter ID scheme.
- Introducing automatic voter registration for all eligible electors.
- Reforming the House of Lords with a proper democratic mandate – the exact form of this will depend on cross-party negotiations, but our starting point as Liberal Democrats will be the Lords Reform Bill which passed in the House of Commons in 2012.

- Transferring greater powers away from Westminster and Whitehall, in the context of a federal United Kingdom with strong voices for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland (see Policy Motion A *Framework for England in a Federal UK* for more details).
- Enabling all UK citizens living abroad to vote for MPs in separate overseas constituencies, and to participate in UK referendums.
- Making it easier, faster and more secure for British overseas voters to participate in all UK parliamentary elections and referendums.
- Introduce a Fixed-term Parliaments Act to give Parliament – instead of the Prime Minister alone – the power to call and set the date of an early general election.
- Bringing into force Section 106 of the Equality Act 2010, requiring political parties to publish candidate diversity data, and requiring the Electoral Commission to publish this in an accessible form.
- Creating an Access to Elected Office Fund to help support disabled candidates and candidates with caring responsibilities with the additional costs of standing for office that they face.
- Promoting the use of forms of participatory democracy such as Citizens Assemblies (where a randomly selected, demographically diverse group of people is brought together to deliberate on a specific issue, learn from experts, and make formal policy recommendations to elected representatives) to find solutions to the greatest challenges we face, such as tackling the climate emergency and the use of artificial intelligence by the state.

3.3 Local Democracy and Devolution

3.3.1 A vigorous local democratic culture is the bedrock for a healthy democracy. Local government is the most immediately visible face of democracy. It provides services that people rely on a day to day basis, from fixing roads to emptying bins and providing social care. Many people are

more likely to get actively involved in local issues directly affecting their communities than in national politics, and are more likely to feel a direct connection to their local representatives.

3.3.2 Over the last two decades local government has faced reorganisation, massive funding cuts, loss of power and overly directive interference from Westminster. Voters elect councillors to deliver services and positive change for their communities, yet councillors too often have neither the power nor funds to fix the problems they see.

3.3.3 Democracy is undermined when voters see the officials they elect unable to deliver. While outstanding Liberal Democrat led councils and councillors deliver change and protect services, they are not immune to the pressures that all of local government faces.

3.3.4 Notably, England remains a highly centralised nation. Liberal Democrats support passing more powers down from Westminster and Whitehall to the regions. However the current model of Combined Mayoral Authorities raises serious concerns about accountability, with low turnouts in elections and limited scrutiny by elected councillors and remains frustratingly opaque.

3.3.5 Liberal Democrats will support and enhance local government by protecting the status of local government across the UK and supporting real devolution in England and the return of powers from Westminster to local government.

3.3.6 Policy proposals:

- Implementing the Single Transferable Vote (STV) for local elections in England to ensure proportional representation and better councillor accountability.
- Ending the top-down reorganisation of councils and the imposition of elected mayors on communities who do not want them.
- Devolving more fiscal and economic power to local authorities.
- Supporting the presence of community, town and parish councils across all nations, as channels for democratic representation at a level closest to voters, especially in areas that are moving to unitary local government. This will help to counteract the long-term decline in the number of elected councillors. We oppose any moves to reduce financial powers and remove the power of general competence from this tier of councils.
- Providing real-term funding increases, alongside a fair funding review, to help councils keep pace with inflation and a growing, ageing population. This includes 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.

3.4 Media

3.4.1 The quality of public debate has declined significantly in recent years, with growing polarisation, hostility and rejection of traditionally accepted norms of behaviour. This has especially been the case online, with incitements to violence, misinformation and harmful content spreading at an alarming rate.

3.4.2 It is not just a problem online. Traditional news media has also undergone a decline in recent years, with local journalism diminishing, and trust in the quality of established news outlets also falling.

3.4.3 Ordinary people are increasingly vulnerable to exploitation by hostile actors, without being well equipped with the tools they need to make informed choices about the information they consume and how they interpret it. The education system in England has failed to support young people in navigating the pace of change, and older generations who did not grow up with the internet are currently not offered any lifelong education in this area.

3.4.4 Policy proposals:

- Banning elected representatives from receiving payments for social media posts.
- Requiring very large social media platforms to negotiate fair compensation to news providers whose content appears on their sites.
- Funding local journalism and independent fact-checkers with a share of a levy on very large social media platforms; and making it easier for these organisations to gain charitable status.
- Commissioning a second Leveson-type review of media regulation, covering new media in addition to traditional broadcast and print media, recognising that the media scene has evolved significantly since the original Leveson Inquiry reported in 2012.
- Ensuring police and prosecutors are properly trained to identify hate crimes and incitement to violence and take swift action.
- Introducing lifelong learning for all citizens about the digital public sphere and how to navigate it.

3.5 Promoting informed citizenship

3.5.1 16- and 17-year-olds do not have the right to vote for the Commons and local government in England, although they do have the vote for the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Senedd and for local government in Scotland and Wales. Liberal Democrats have long championed votes at 16, and welcome the current government's commitment to legislate on this issue.

3.5.2 There is also a wider problem of a lack of understanding of how politics works. Many people do not understand where the layers of responsibility lie between local, regional, national and UK-wide governments on different issues or how these responsibilities differ between one postcode and another. General elections are in fact a series of individual constituency elections, but many voters see them as a vote for a Prime Minister, with some potentially quizzical as to why they cannot vote for party leaders directly. There is a clear need for better political education, which would benefit more than just young people.

3.5.3 Policy proposals:

- Giving 16- and 17-year-olds the right to vote in UK general elections and referendums, and local elections in England.
- Strengthening citizenship education in primary and secondary schools, with a greater focus on political and media literacy; and elevating the academic status of Citizenship GCSE.
- Updating the guidance on political impartiality in schools, to ensure clarity for teachers on how to address dis- and misinformation.
- Increasing the public funding available to civil society organisations who can play a role in lifelong citizenship education, including political media literacy. This should include the creation of a long-term, ringfenced Community Democratic Resilience Fund to

support youth services, training for educators and parents, and local democratic participation initiatives.

- Giving the BBC an explicit mandate within the BBC Charter to equip people with the tools they need to participate in our democratic processes.
- Mandating the provision of televised debates in general elections, based on rules produced by Ofcom that ensure their design increases the political literacy of voters.

3.6 Radicalisation

3.6.1 Extremism and radicalisation pose a systemic threat to liberal democracy through erosion of trust, participation, and pluralism. The ways they spread include disinformation campaigns, conspiracy movements, intimidation of minorities and political actors, and persistent narratives delegitimising elections, courts, the media, and public institutions. They are often driven by long-term exposure to grievance-based narratives, particularly online, and are intensified during moments of crisis and political uncertainty.

3.6.2 Increasingly, radicalisation and foreign interference are twinned threats in our democracy. Foreign adversaries such as Russia have ramped up their support – including financial support – for extreme movements in the UK, in order to foster division and violence in our communities and undermine democratic principles

3.6.3 Existing government policies have tended to prioritise security responses to violent extremism, and have proved controversial with some within marginalised communities. While necessary, this approach alone is insufficient to address the broader democratic harms associated with

non-violent extremism and misinformation. Radicalisation has also changed rapidly in recent years, requiring a fresh approach that answers the challenges we now face and protects our communities going forward.

3.6.4 By focusing on democratic resilience, transparency, and community empowerment, Liberal Democrats can offer a principled, evidence-based defence of democracy that protects liberty while confronting authoritarian and extremist threats.

3.6.5 Policy proposals:

- A full overhaul of Prevent including to deliver a new counter-radicalisation programme – a community-led engagement strategy focused on minimising exposure to pathways towards violent extremism and to meet the challenges of today's threats.
- Improving cooperation with our European neighbours including by working with Europol and Eurojust to develop and implement a joint strategy for dealing with cross-border threats, with the closest possible cooperation on shared priorities.
- Imposing a duty on social media and other tech companies to have 'Community Safety Teams', underpinned by minimum quality standards, to tackle extremism, hate, misinformation and other harmful content.
- Regulating online platforms in proportion to the harms they cause, including harmful content and addictive or manipulative algorithmic design, through an age-restrictions framework that incentivises platforms to reduce, among other harms, the amplification of extremist content, disinformation, and crisis-event amplification.

- Introducing training for educators, youth workers, and safeguarding professionals on emerging digital radicalisation pathways, including gaming-adjacent environments.
- Ensuring that counter-radicalisation approaches also uphold protections for academic freedom, journalistic activity and legitimate political dissent, including upholding the right to protest.

Defending Democracy

Paper 165

This paper has been approved for debate by the Federal Conference by the Federal Policy Committee under the terms of Article 7.4 of the Federal Constitution.

Within the policy-making procedure of the Liberal Democrats, the Federal Party determines the policy of the Party in those areas which might reasonably be expected to fall within the remit of the federal institutions in the context of a federal United Kingdom.

The Party in England, the Scottish Liberal Democrats, the Welsh Liberal Democrats and the Northern Ireland Local Party determine the policy of the Party on all other issues, except that any or all of them may confer this power upon the Federal Party in any specified area or areas.

The Party in England has chosen to pass up policy-making to the Federal level. If approved by Conference, this paper will therefore form the policy of the Federal Party on federal issues and the Party in England on English issues. In appropriate policy areas, Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland party policy would take precedence.

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