

**Nick Clegg responds to questions
submitted by the Beveridge Group**

5th Nov, 2007

Q1: If all parties now claim to be localist, environmentalist, supportive of the free economy and quality public services what make the Liberal Democrats distinctive?

Response: The other parties are attempting to clamber onto liberal territory for a reason: the old battles of left and right, capital and labour, bosses and workers, have subsided, and politics has moved onto a different set of challenges. They are challenges for which modern liberalism was tailor-made.

Like how to counter the epidemic of powerlessness that has left people bewildered by faceless bureaucracies in both the public and private sectors; how to create the real social mobility that neither left nor right has been able to deliver; where to strike the right balance between national security and individual liberty, to provide safe communities at a time of heightened fear; how to engage the public, mobilise business and Government, and use our clout in the world to tackle global warming; and how to make sense of globalisation in a fast moving world.

The old parties of left and right, the old doctrines of socialism and conservatism, just aren't equipped to deal with these challenges. So though they flounder about with vague commitments to devolution, or warm words about the environment, they're behaving like people in a darkened room, scrabbling around for the light switch. They simply don't have the answers.

The political battles of the 21st century will be fought out on liberal territory. We should relish, not fear, that challenge. We will have home advantage, and while the other parties' commitments to liberalism are half-hearted, confused and confusing, ours is real. Authenticity of belief will pay dividends in the years to come.

Q2: Every politician says these days it wants to 'empower people' what does this actually mean and does it mean giving people responsibilities they do not currently have as well as entitlements?

Response: It's no wonder politicians talk about empowerment: there's an epidemic of powerlessness in Britain today. People feel bewildered in the face of gigantism in both the public and private sectors. All politicians have identified the problem, but it's liberals who can offer a solution.

For me empowerment means three things. First, we must reinvent the archaic structure of Westminster politics. The lop-sided imbalances of a worn out electoral system which leaves millions of voters disenfranchised must be reformed in its entirety.

Second, there must be a radical transfer of powers and resources from central government to local government. This is a vital step in reversing the stifling grip of Whitehall-centred Government.

And third, crucially, we must move to create a sense of daily empowerment in the way in which people use public services. Empowerment cannot be reserved solely for the moment we cast our vote at local or general elections.

This has nothing to do with pie-in-the-sky proposals for vouchers in education or US-style health insurance. Instead, Lib Dem policies such as the `pupil premium`, which I played a role in shaping following research I conducted into more progressive European education systems, point the way ahead. Such an approach targets inherited disadvantage through sharply progressive per capita student funding entitlements and promotes smaller class sizes for those kids who need it most.

Some of the radical pilot projects giving individual patients with long-term conditions direct authority over the way they receive health and social care funding are also illustrative of what is possible in the future.

Our objective shouldn't simply be to bring power 'closer' to people. It is to give power 'to' people.

Q3: Some USA states empower their citizens by allowing them to carry guns - what kinds of citizen 'empowerment' do you not support?

Response: Empowerment is about giving individuals, families and communities as much control as possible over their own lives free from disadvantage, prejudice and needless Government interference. The limit to empowerment is of course where your power, your liberty, comes at the expense of someone else's.

Q4: How would you ensure that people working in the public services are motivated by a public service ethos and highly productive?

Response: We need to free public servants from demoralising meddling from the centre, by removing central targets, cutting back on unnecessary reporting requirements, simplifying the inspection and audit process and getting central government focused on strategic decision making, not micro-management. We need to work on inspiring professionals, not restricting them.

I represent the constituency with the largest number of people working in the health and education sectors as a proportion of the local workforce anywhere in the country. On a daily basis I see the depth of commitment my constituents have to public service, to doing something which has a value for the whole community. This is an ethos, a civic virtue almost, which can never be reduced to the cold logic of profit and share value.

But of course we must constantly strive to make public services more human in scale, centred on people not just administrative systems.

That's why, for instance, I'm enormously intrigued by the work of the Merseyside Fire Brigade. Community fire officers, who are already visiting people in their homes to promote fire safety have been trained to offer other advice too, while they're in people's homes. They can give basic benefit, employment and housing advice. This not only gives a human face to public services, instead of the giant unresponsive bureaucracy people normally see, it also provides a great boost to the motivation of public servants doing the job. It's saying to them: there's so much more you can be doing. It's giving them the opportunity and ambition to improve people's lives.

Q5: What are the potential risks of allowing social enterprises and voluntary bodies to perform roles formerly carried out by public services?

Response: Social enterprises and voluntary bodies can be highly effective and innovative, but there are some risks too in transferring to them the roles formerly carried out by public bodies. Of course, this is particularly the case if funding does not follow the transfer, or if the transfer is used as an opportunity or excuse to cut back on funding. Other potential downsides include quality control; incentive structures; and the higher risk of supplier failure. We should involve social enterprises and voluntary bodies in public services where they can genuinely offer the innovations needed to improve - or, very often, localise and humanise - those services. But this must never be a blanket measure, transferring all responsibility for vital services to the voluntary sector, as suggested by some Conservatives. There is a vital role for the state in providing public services.

Q6: Do you favour allowing councils to resume their role as a provider of affordable housing and how do you think affordable housing targets can be met?

Response: Party policy, which would give councils back the financial power to build and invest in their housing, seems to me to be the right way forward. Housing associations also have an important role to play, but the government

must stop bribing and bullying councils into stock transfers. Where people want to remain the tenants of the council, they should have that right.

As for meeting affordable housing targets, I think we need to be much more innovative. Winning the argument for any new housing development is always tough, but if you can engage local people in design and spatial planning, it becomes far easier. Adding the extra promise that homes will be affordable often helps tip the balance too. Councils should be able to set their own affordable housing targets, and use Section 106 agreements or planning tariffs (as developed by Liberal Democrats in Milton Keynes and Cambridge) creatively to secure affordable housing from developers. We can also do much more to release public sector land for housing, where the land itself acts as the government subsidy. South Shropshire have shown the way forward with their "golden share" scheme of keeping new homes affordable. Ideas put forward by Ed Davey for Community Land Trusts, which would act like a housing mutual, must also be developed further so that they can be implemented as quickly as possible.

In rural areas, I've also spoken about the enormous potential for using vacant farm buildings to improve affordable housing. I was with Tim Farron earlier this week looking at his "Home in the Farm" campaign in his constituency on precisely this issue. The rural housing crisis is of staggering proportions. Of all the Cumbrian hill farmers Tim and I met not a single one of them told me that their children would continue to farm in the way that their families had done for generations. High housing costs is one of the main reasons why children are being driven away from their home areas. By my reckoning, up to 60,000 homes could be delivered in rural areas in vacant or derelict buildings if planning systems were more flexible. There's no question of a "blot on the landscape" when you're reusing existing buildings.
