

The Radical Association Conference Briefing: Autumn 2017



This briefing covers the Radical Association's perspective on all the motions at Autumn Conference. For the most part it is intended to be usefully descriptive rather than prescriptive, and to give a viewpoint on the motions' intentions and likely outcomes from a radical perspective, as well as highlighting our concerns on particular issues. We will update this briefing with further additions or emergency briefings as amendments and emergency motions appear.

Brexit: A Change of Course

Our major campaign for this conference is to help campaigners from across the party bring a decisive vote on Brexit policy to the conference floor, in a two-stage process.

1. **SATURDAY 9AM: Suspension of Standing Orders Vote**

This will be a debate in which conference will be given the opportunity to suspend standing orders to enable a debate on the motion the following day. This is the more difficult vote, requiring two thirds of members to vote in favour: we recommend that all members come and **vote to suspend standing orders**.

2. **SUNDAY: Slot F17, Europe**

This will be the timeslot for the actual debate, if the motion is passed. We encourage members to come and seek to **pass the motion unamended**.

What does the motion do?

The motion we are attempting to bring forwards would change Liberal Democrat policy to have the clear end-point aim of reversing Article 50 and remaining a member of the European Union, as opposed to our current policy of having a referendum on the terms of the deal.

The motion does not force our MPs to stop calling for cross-party support for a referendum on the terms if they believe that is the best way to seek to reverse Article 50: all it does is make clear our ultimate end goal as a party and what a Liberal Democrat government in its own right would do.

This would clearly differentiate and clarify our position as the UK's leading pro-remain political force, something that will become more vital in the coming months as the impact of Brexit on family incomes and public services grows increasingly clear. The motion makes it clear, that if we were in government we would treat a general election mandate as one to allow us to reverse Article 50, and makes our position shorter and sharper which will make it easier and quicker to explain on the doorsteps to allow our campaigners & MPs to focus on a wider range of policies overall.

Why are we calling for these votes?

The Radical Association believes that the Lib Dem membership, with conference as our main mechanism of doing so, deserve a clear and decisive say over major matters of policy and strategy. In the present environment, our policy on Brexit is central, and as unfortunately there was no separate vote permitted on this issue when party policy was set last year, we support the campaign to give conference a final say.

We also believe that a clear goal of remaining in the EU will clarify our position for voters, bolster Liberal Democrat grassroots activism, and help us build a broader framework of policy around and with that core feature. We believe that a clear, simple, honest policy on the EU will help build trust in our party and underpin a wider radical liberal agenda that can appeal across the UK. We hope you'll join us to help achieve that.

Guide to Conference Motions

Saturday

F4 Learning to Communicate in English

This motion contains little to disagree with; it is a very specific policy motion on a strategy for tackling a specific problem. We welcome the recognition that excessive cutbacks in this area during the 2010-15 period coincided with falling use of ESOL classes. Liberal Democrat policymaking in future should pay more attention to the potential long-term impacts of short term fiscal retrenchment, one aspect of which this motion rightly seeks to reverse.

F6 The Paris Agreement and UK Climate Policy

This motion essentially restates current Liberal Democrat principles and plans regarding climate policy, with a couple of topical observations. As it does not obviously change any of our current policy positions at all, it is not clear why it has been allocated a full debate slot at conference. We have no objection to anything stated in the motion, but it might have been more useful for conference to discuss how best to implement the energy generation strategy, which is unclear on the relative balance and costs of different generation methods, or on future research possibilities and funding, such as the state of smart grid technology or clean nuclear.

F8 The Impact of Brexit on Public Services

This motion makes, so far as can be ascertained, no difference to Liberal Democrat policy. Whilst of course we decry the impact of Brexit upon public services, we also decry pretty much everything else about Brexit, making this somewhat meaningless as a debate. It indeed concerns us to some extent that the public service impact is what has been chosen for highlighting here, as it might risk sidelining a wider, bolder, values-based case for European cooperation beyond the direct impact on UK service provision.

F10 Natural Environment Policy

This motion does, unlike most of the other Saturday motions, seem to represent a small but substantive policy change, primarily calling for the opening of an Office of Environmental Responsibility and regular reporting to parliament on environmental protections. It is, additionally, useful and welcome that austerity cuts are identified as having been a problem regarding environmental deterioration.

Once again there is little to disagree with in this policy, but the things it calls for are presented in concerningly nebulous terms, and it perhaps focusses too heavily on the constitutional mechanics rather than the delivery of a better natural environment. A more radical motion might have discussed whether improved legal protections for

SSSI sites and nature reserves could be implemented, and perhaps most importantly looked at how to make housebuilding more sustainable and better environmentally adapted in the long term.

F13 Membership Subscription

The RA is pleased to note that the basic rates of subscription will not be increased, and support this motion.

Sunday

F16 Armed Forces Personnel: Recruitment, Retention and Welfare

This seems a broadly reasonable motion, and we welcome the calls for increased mental health support and better housing provision for service personnel. We wonder whether more could be done on the community aspects of integrating armed forces families with their local communities and facilitating stronger community activities, organisation and development within armed forces communities, which could have significant benefits for overall welfare and retention rates.

F17 Europe

See our section on “Brexit: A Change of Course” at the start of the briefing for more information about this slot.

F21 Safe Building Standards for all Homes

This motion broadly contains sensible measures for restoring basic safety standards. We suspect that more clarity may be needed on what means of redress homeowners should have when action is not taken, as increased regulation will only make a serious difference if it is properly enforced and penalties are sufficiently serious for landlords to change their behaviour.

We also question how the costs of additional safety checks will be apportioned, and whether any mechanisms can be put in place to prevent landlords simply passing the costs of electrical or other safety checks onto tenants in the form of rental increases. In the long run, there needs to be a dramatic shift of power toward tenants and away from landlords in the housing market, and whilst this motion at least seeks to affirm the basic standards that all landlords should be obliged to keep, there is clearly far more to be done beyond the narrow scope of this motion.

F22 Centenary of the Balfour Declaration

We leave members to look at this highly sensitive issue for themselves. It is unclear to what extent the motion as written changes party policy, something that we hope the proposers will clarify when they introduce the debate.

Monday

F24 Defeating Terrorism, Protecting Liberties

This is generally a good motion, and sets out a clear liberal position opposing mass surveillance. We have few changes to suggest to the motion as a whole, though “Conference calls upon the government” should perhaps have had some reflection of the very good point regarding encryption made in the previous section.

F26 Employment in the 21st Century

The recommendations in this motion include some sensible changes to employment law. The ending of tribunal fees (one of the worse measures introduced during the coalition years) is a particularly welcome change, as is shifting the burden of proof onto employers. Increased support for cooperative & unionised action in non-traditional workforce is likewise a welcome measure, and speaks well to the party’s commitment to community-driven action.

There are aspects where this motion could go further, however. We particularly note that conference calls for (8) is a fairly feeble measure for supporting the self-employed. Even short of our preferred solution of a minimum income, which would ensure easier access to self-employment, it would have been nice to see an option of abolishing the minimum income floor altogether put to the conference floor. There may also be further possibilities for direct support, ideally administered at a local level, which could help protect the low paid self-employed from economic fluctuations.

F28 Encouraging Companies to be Responsible Corporate Citizens

This motion aims to provide a range of ideas on improving corporate governance in the UK. While it does detail real improvements to corporate governance frameworks, it lacks clarity and does not deliver on all of its stated aims. The best parts of the motion are probably those seeking to amend the Companies Act to rebalance the aims of publicly limited companies toward explicit goals of social responsibility, though it would have been good for the motion to provide a great deal more clarity on how a company's obligations toward communities or the environment would be measured or enforced, a necessary step to them being meaningful.

To give a few more specific points: it concerns us that certain resolution points are somewhat weasel-worded in nature; seeking to "promote" worker representation on boards and "encourage" shareholders to more actively run their companies risks bordering on the meaninglessly hopeful, and stronger action may be needed. It is also unclear why conference resolves (9) implies that privately owned companies should be permitted a less prescriptive set of requirements than those under corporate ownership; differences between companies should surely be based on turnover and wealth rather than whether the ownership is individual, subsidiary, or corporate in form.

Perhaps the largest and most obvious wider issue with the motion from a radical perspective is the lack of action on cooperative and social businesses, which are recognised as a focus of long term Liberal Democrat policy but are not in general dealt with in the motion itself. Whilst we agree with the idea that all companies should be given a broad statutory responsibility toward stakeholders, a full reform of corporate governance should recognise that ultimately "corporate citizenship" can only be achieved by more radical reform of the purpose and beneficiaries of large institutions of this sort, genuinely widening our understanding of a corporate body to rely on stakeholderism rather than the narrow wealth-centred model used at present. Mechanisms to require increased cooperative ownership or removal from the profit-making sector of parts of businesses, for example, could be areas for future discussion and at least a nominal recognition of this would have been a welcome addition to the motion.

Tuesday

F30 European Atomic Energy Community

This is yet another motion which adds absolutely no substance whatsoever to our existing policy. The RA fully agrees that we should retain membership of EURATOM. Retaining said membership was, however, already party policy, as the motion itself notes. It is frustrating to see so many motions like this one go through that simply restate our current position on a given issue.

F32 Protecting Small Businesses

This is a broadly reasonable motion, and we especially welcome the call for site value rating to be permitted immediate pilot implementation at a local level. We question whether more could be done to either provide direct relief for small businesses or otherwise ease their ability to stay in properties and continue their operations. This is an area where stronger community politics could have made a welcome addition to the motion, for example by considering whether a flexible system to allow local government to work out which business categories most needed rate caps in their area might be an alternative to the "Pub Cap" model.

F34 Gun and Knife Crime

There are certainly some good aspects to this motion – the call for regular amnesties is welcome, for example – but there may be flaws in it as well. The singling out of faith institutions to be worked with on this issue and lack of mention of other community groups is a strange drafting choice in a world where the proportion of the population without an active religious faith is increasing. The call for rebuilding community policing is vital, but rebuilding trust in the police may require a genuine and significant reduction in stop and search, and the call for “better targeting” of stop and search powers based on community police evidence may be the wrong tone to take for rebuilding trust. The recognition of broader social roots to increasing knife-carrying is welcome, but conference is not asked to call for any more radical and wider strategy to research or address these issues, which makes the motion feel somewhat incomplete.

Comments & queries regarding this briefing should be sent to the RA committee at office@radicalassociation.org.