

HOME AFFAIRS TEAM CONSULTATIVE SESSION

Liberal Democrat Crime Policy – No Soft Options

Purpose of session:

Crime and anti-social behaviour are consistently high priorities for communities across the country – a fact that is borne out repeatedly in opinion polls at both national and local level.

Despite a lack of public confidence in the government's handling of issues such as police numbers and sentencing, the Liberal Democrats still labour under a 'soft on crime' image and are the focus of ill-informed attacks from opposition parties and the media on our views in this area.

The Lib Dem Home Affairs Team in the House of Commons is therefore consulting with members to find ways in which the party can improve its communications with the public on these vital issues so that they can be better informed about our party's policies and opinions about being effective on crime.

Context:

Liberal Democrats are proud of our record not just in opposing the government's ill-judged and illiberal legislation on crime and disorder, but also in terms of the effective action being taken up and down the country by councils under Lib Dem control and influence.

Local authorities such as Liverpool, Watford, Newcastle and Stockport – to name just four Lib Dem-run authorities – have a well-established reputation for tackling these problems at a local level (see local election manifesto 2006 for further specific details on Lib Dem successes in this area).

Nevertheless, the context of the debate on crime and disorder is continually changing.

It has become abundantly clear that the government's agenda on tackling crime and anti-social behaviour is failing. In fact, Labour stand accused of having a charge sheet on crime that is growing rapidly. For example:

- Record prison population coupled with record re-offending rates.
- Plummeting conviction rates.
- Massive failure rates for ASBOs and rising impact of anti-social behaviour.
- Divisive proposals to merge police forces, thereby breaking the link between communities and the police.
- Failure to implement recommendations from reports on gun control (Cullen report) and child protection (Bichard report).
- A host of authoritarian and centralist policies designed to strengthen the state against the individual such as ID cards, the DNA database, attacks on freedom of speech etc.

Furthermore, it is now apparent that the Home Office as an organisation is ill-equipped to manage not only the fight against crime but also to manage itself.

The issue facing the Liberal Democrat Home Affairs Team in Parliament and party members across the country is how we maintain our principled, liberal position on dealing with crime and anti-social behaviour whilst at the same time ensuring that the public sees our policies as an attractive and effective alternative.

At a time when the government's rhetoric becomes increasingly tough and legislation proves to be inversely effective and the Conservatives continue to lack policy credibility, Liberal Democrats have a unique opportunity to reverse the perception that the party is 'soft on crime'. The debate on these matters has shifted towards finding effective solutions, not just providing populist soundbites and pandering to a right-wing tabloid agenda.

It is in this context that the Lib Dem Home Affairs Team in the House of Commons is seeking this opportunity to consult and listen to the views of party members about the direction of our own policies in relation to crime and anti-social behaviour.

Some current issues:

The Home Affairs Team has faced a number of key issues in recent months. Below are just a few of the positions the party has taken on such matters. These examples are not intended to form the focus of debate during the session, but rather to point to the kinds of policy questions the party faces in this area.

- Proposed longer sentences for people who carry knives in public.
- Proposal to Introduce a Violent Offenders Register.
- Resources being focussed on frontline policing instead of ID cards.
- Highlighted profound weaknesses in the Home Office's ability to deliver and have launched 'Home Office Watch' a regular log of failings and inadequacies in the system.
- Opposed police force mergers, to maintain the vital link between communities and their police.
- Promoted the role of individuals and communities in tackling crime and disorder.
- Criticised delays in compensation pay-outs for victims of crime.
- Condemned prison overcrowding and management of serious offenders released on license and highlighted the lack of public confidence in sentencing policy.

Questions the party may wish to consider:

- How do we marry Liberal principle with workable practice?
- What practical measures to tackle crime and anti-social behaviour have members seen in communities which have proved to be successful?
- How do Liberal Democrats project an 'effective on crime' image without indulging in empty populist rhetoric?
- Where should Liberal Democrats focus their efforts in developing future policy on crime, disorder and anti-social behaviour?
- How do we strike the right balance between defending the rights of victims and defending the rights of those accused of crime?

Nick Clegg MP, Lynne Featherstone MP, Mark Hunter MP