

# CITIZEN extra

## ELECTION MANIFESTO 2010



The upcoming general election will be the most important election in years. After years of scandals, ranging from 'cash for honours' through to the recent expenses crisis, party politics has never been held in greater disrepute. All party leaders now say they accept that we can't go on like this, but which parties are offering real change, rather than just the illusion of it?

In a major new initiative, Unlock Democracy will be conducting a survey over the coming weeks to assess to what extent the parties are committed to democratic reform.

Over the next few pages we outline what we think should be done. We'll be using this list to benchmark each of the parties' own policies.

Unlock Democracy is committed to pushing this agenda in the run up to the election and beyond - but we need your help. Please raise these issues with your constituency candidates so that they know that people care about the state of politics. And please consider donating to our general election campaign so we can spread the word as widely as possible.

**Unlock  
Democracy**  
incorporating  
Charter 88



[www.unlockdemocracy.org.uk](http://www.unlockdemocracy.org.uk)

#### About Us

*Unlock Democracy is the leading campaign for democracy, rights and freedoms. We exist to build a vibrant, inclusive democracy that puts power in the hands of the people. We are owned and run by our members.*

*Unlock Democracy is a non-aligned organisation, committed to working inclusively across the political spectrum.*

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# Key One: Fair, Free and Honest Elections



Elections are the basis of any democracy. It is essential that people are able to vote without their vote being stolen, that their vote counts, and that the election cannot be bought by wealthy individuals or groups.

## **Priority: A Proportional, Open Electoral System**

This general election could be decided by as few as 35,000 swing voters in 75 constituencies. Under our current electoral system most votes either do not elect anyone, or pile up in safe constituencies above the level needed to win that seat, so count for nothing.

All UK elections should offer real choice and fairness. No politician should be able to rely on their party finding them a safe seat. We want:

- A proportional electoral system that broadly reflects the votes cast for each party in an election, but also allows voters to support specific candidates and not just party lists.
- Voters to have the right to force a referendum on whether to recall their elected representatives and force a by-election.

## **Preventing Voting Fraud**

Elections must be trustworthy. Those casting votes must be entitled to do so and votes must not be stolen. We need:

- Individual voter registration. The planned transition from our current flawed system of household registration must be fully funded by central government.
- Voters to prove their identity. We believe that voters should provide evidence of identity (e.g. credit card, passport or driving licence) when voting.
- A statutory obligation for the Government to respond to Electoral Commission recommendations. They should be compelled to formally respond within six months.

## **Party Funding Transparency and Caps on Funding**

Money can have a powerful effect on the outcome of general elections, particularly in marginal constituencies. The perception that money can buy influence, policies and even peerages is corroding UK politics. We need to:

- Halve the current cap on national spending for each party.
- Cap donations at a low level such as £10,000.
- Regulate donations from companies to ensure that the money does not come from a foreign or other illegal source.
- Ensure trade union donations are linked to individuals by having an 'opt-in' box on membership forms.

# Key Two: Rights, Freedoms and a Written Constitution

The UK government has too much unchecked power, inherited from our feudal past. We need to catch up with the rest of the world by adopting a written constitution designed to limit what governments can do in our name. Too often, governments are free to casually compromise our fundamental rights and freedoms. We need stronger safeguards and to entrench the right to redress.

## **Priority: A UK Written Constitution and Bill of Rights**

A written constitution is a formal document defining the rules that govern the political system and sets out what the Government may and may not do. A written constitution should contain a bill of rights, giving every citizen a legal remedy if their rights are infringed by the State. The Human Rights Act 1998 was a crucial first step towards this and must remain the minimum standard of rights protection across the UK. Every person in the UK, citizen or not, deserves the full protection that should result from respect for their universal human rights.

A UK written constitution must:

- Guarantee political equality and help society aspire towards social equality.
- Protect democratic representation in and authority over government and public affairs.
- Ensure that individuals can claim and protect their rights.
- Regulate the decentralisation of power and the sharing of sovereignty.
- Ensure that human rights protection applies to every person in the UK, with additional rights possible through legislation by devolved administrations.

To develop a constitution which enjoys public support requires a wide-scale process of public discussion, debate and participation.



## **Protect Civil Liberties**

Protection of civil liberties and human rights should be at the core of a fair and democratic society. A series of laws have profoundly undermined our protection against unfair trial and punishment without law. As a priority the government must:

- Repeal 28 days detention without charge.
- Scrap control orders allowing effective house arrest.
- End state complicity in torture.
- Remove unfair limitations on freedom of expression - in particular, remove unreasonable restrictions on the right to protest and review current libel laws.

## **Protect the Right to Privacy**

Individual privacy is under serious threat from the state and corporations. This makes all of us more vulnerable to incompetence, vindictiveness and corruption. The government must:

- Abolish the National Identity Register, the identity card scheme and ContactPoint (the national children's database).
- The powers granted to government departments and agencies under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 must be limited in scope and brought under greater judicial oversight.
- Decrease, and better regulate use of, CCTV.
- Remove all records of innocent people from the DNA database.



# Key Three: Stronger Parliament and Accountable Government

Our parliament is effectively under the control of government whips. Too many decisions are taken out of parliament's hands entirely, to be taken by government ministers and quangos. This has led to too little scrutiny, bad laws and the emergence of a political class more interested in patronage than accountability.

## House of Commons Reform

Fundamental reform of the House of Commons is needed to create a chamber which can scrutinise legislation and hold the government to account. The House of Commons should:

- Establish a business committee so that time for debate is not in the gift of the government.
- Increase time available for committee work.
- Select committee reports should be debated in the House of Commons.
- Allow more questions on urgent concerns.
- Allow members of select committees to be elected by secret ballot of MPs.
- Introduce training for MPs.

## An Elected House of Lords

For parliament to have legitimacy, it must be elected. The House of Lords should be a fully elected second chamber, with:

- The same powers as the current House of Lords.
- Members elected using an open and proportional system in thirds for non-renewable 12 year terms.
- Between 250 and 350 members.
- Experts invited in to consider specific bills.
- No government ministers.



## Limit Government Power

The UK government has enormous powers which are not open to scrutiny — these powers should be accountable to parliament and thus, ultimately, the public. To achieve this:

- Parliament must vote before troops are deployed abroad.
- Parliament should be able to advise on what should and shouldn't be included in a treaty before it is negotiated rather than just voting on the end product.
- A select committee should determine how statutory instruments are approved so that the government cannot avoid scrutiny.

## Reform the Unelected State

Increasingly public policy functions are being carried out by unelected public bodies (quangos). Many of these should be scrapped entirely but some perform important regulatory functions that cannot be legitimately performed by government. To make quangos accountable:

- Their functions should be transferred to national or local government where possible.
- Where this is not appropriate they should either hold elections amongst stakeholders or be made directly accountable to parliamentary committee as with the Electoral Commission.

# Key Four: Bringing Power Closer to the People

Power is far too centralised in the UK. We need a radical shift in the balance of power in favour of local government and the people. We need to find new ways of engaging people at both a local and national level in between elections as well as on election day.

## Create a Citizens' Convention

How reforms are made is just as important as what form they take. Too often, politicians have too much of a vested interest in the status quo to adequately decide on reforms. The decision-making must be taken, in large part, out of their hands. The public must have a stake in any changes made. No single group has a monopoly on wisdom.

A new UK constitution should develop from a wide-scale process of public discussion, debate and participation. One feature should be a citizens' convention, comprising a hundred randomly chosen individuals. The convention would consult specialists and the wider public and report its findings back to parliament. Proposals would be subject to a referendum.

## Make Direct Democracy a Reality

The UK should make greater use of direct democracy at both a national and local level to complement and, on occasion, challenge representative democracy. Democracy is not simply a matter of majority rule, therefore there needs to be clear rules about where direct democracy can and cannot be used.

As a first step towards introducing more direct democracy, parliament should introduce:

- A petitions committee in the House of Commons.
- A 'people's bill' system whereby a specific proposal would be automatically debated and voted on in parliament, and thus potentially become law, if a million people petitioned for it.
- A veto system triggering a referendum if a million people petition to overturn an act of parliament within six months of it becoming law.

## Radically Increase Devolution and Decentralisation

The process of devolution started in 1997 is ongoing in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Outside of London, the process of devolution in England has not even begun. The right to self-government should form a central principle in the UK constitution. Specifically:

- Communities and nations in the UK should be able to choose the nature and pace of devolution themselves, with only certain powers reserved at a UK level.
- If 5% of the electorate in a specific area petition for self-government, an independent deliberative process should be established to decide what form this should take, and its recommendations should be subject to a referendum. We take no position on whether or not areas should remain as part of the UK.

## Stronger Local Government

For far too long in the UK we have had local management, not government, with funding and service delivery targets controlled by central government. This target culture must end. National politicians need to avoid making kneejerk attacks on 'postcode lotteries'; local differences in service provision are potentially good as they allow best practice to flourish – but they must be accountable to the public. To achieve this:

- Local government must raise a larger proportion of its resources locally, and have much greater flexibility over how to do this, than at present.
- Where local functions must be run centrally they should be subject to local scrutiny by the local authority's scrutiny panel.
- The status of local government needs to be enhanced, with improved training and increased remuneration for key positions such as scrutiny committee chairs.

# Key Five: A Culture of Informed Political Interest and Responsibility

Democracy is ultimately about people, not institutions. Without the informed participation of the people, reforms can only ever have a limited effect. We need to provide people with the tools to engage with politics and a culture where everyone sees that they have a place in the political process.

## Make Government More Open

Openness in government must become the norm. To achieve this:

- The Freedom of Information Act should be defended, its loopholes closed and the scope of the Act extended.
- Government must fulfil its legal obligation to publish local spending reports (which breakdown how much each government department and agency is spending in each local authority).
- There should be free access to publicly generated data such as the national postcode database and Ordnance Survey maps.

## Inclusive Citizenship

We want an inclusive form of citizenship where civic rights are extended to as many UK residents as possible. We reject recent government proposals to narrow it further by removing the voting rights of Commonwealth and Irish citizens who are UK residents. We want to:

- Improve the teaching of citizenship in schools, with a special emphasis on teaching young people about rights.
- Lower the voting age to 16.
- Extend voting rights to all serving members of the armed forces.
- Ensure that all polling stations are accessible for disabled people.
- Grant voting rights to prisoners.



## Engage Under-represented Groups

For political parties to be relevant to wider society, they must reflect the mix of the country they seek to represent. We want:

- Each political party to set targets for achieving fair representation, and to publish the results.
- All prospective parliamentary candidates to be able to request a small amount of unpaid leave or flexible working to campaign.
- Each party to show how the party handles parental leave.

## Broaden Party Participation

Parties must broaden participation beyond their members and improve internal democracy. Experiments in opening up candidate selection to constituents should be encouraged.

Political parties should be encouraged to broaden participation through incentive-based state support to encourage them to engage directly with the public and reduce the importance of rich donors in the political system.

This might take a variety of forms, including:

- A registered supporter system where parties would get a fixed amount for each person they register in exchange for giving them a say over, for example, the selection of candidates.
- Matched funding, where small donations of up to £20 are matched, pound-for-pound.
- Tax relief on donations, in a similar way to how Gift Aid works for charities.

## Ask the Candidates

The more people raising democratic reform with candidates on the doorstep, in writing and at public meetings, the more seriously they will engage with the issues. Here are some sample questions you might want to ask them:

- The current voting system means that the election is decided by a handful of swing voters in marginal constituencies. A party with just a third of the popular vote can get a majority of the seats in the House of Commons. How can this be justified? What would you do to ensure this is corrected?
- The UK is one of the only developed countries in the world where the government and parliament can ignore the rule of law. What would you do to change this? Would you support the introduction of a written constitution?
- Would you oppose the growth of the database state and vote to repeal the National Identity Register and ContactPoint databases?
- Respect for universal human rights is fundamental to democracy. Would you defend and build on the Human Rights Act, which incorporates these principles in UK law?
- How would you engage your constituents in decision-making?

### What People Want

The latest *State of the Nation Survey* (Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust / ICM\*) shows that there is significant support amongst the UK public for political reform:

- 73% want a written constitution.
- 65% want a proportional voting system.
- 73% want people to have the right to initiate and vote on new laws.
- 69% want constituents to be able to petition to sack their MP and hold a new election.
- 65% oppose the National Identity Register.

*\*ICM interviewed 2,288 GB residents aged 18+ between 20 January and 7 February 2010.*

## Help us spread the word — donate today!

I would like to help Unlock Democracy ensure that democratic reform is made a priority in the upcoming general election and beyond. I would like to give the following amount:

£10  £25  £50  Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Any donation of £24 or more entitles you to membership of Unlock Democracy for a year.

Tick here if you do NOT wish to be a member:

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Please make cheques payable to 'Unlock Democracy'.

Return this form to: Unlock Democracy, 6-9 Cynthia Street, FREEPOST KE6946, London N1 9BR.

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