

Well, hello Conference and hasn't everything changed since we last met in March!

Wow! Just wow!

We asked you to all go on the Stop Brexit march on 20 March to make it clear we are the strongest Remain party.

You did that.

It was my privilege to help lead thousands and thousands of Liberal Democrats along with Vince Cable at that march that had over a million people on the streets of London.

We asked you to go out and give us the best results ever in the local elections.

You did that.

We made over 700 gains, and now control 18 councils. We're still making gains in by elections too.

We then said please go out and campaign for our best ever European Elections results, in a snap election, with very little time.

You did that. 16 MEPs.

I'll say it again.

Wow! Just wow!

And then we said (after all of that!), please go and help Jane Dodds and our Welsh colleagues in Brecon and Radnorshire.

So you did that too!

Jane Dodds MP has said she could not have won without all the help you provided.

And over the last couple of months you have been pouring into Sheffield Hallam as well – Laura Gordon: we are with you and will do everything we can to ensure you can join Jane Dodds on those green benches soon.

You see, I knew. I knew that your attitude and approach to life had changed. And all we needed to do was to get out there and make sure that people in our local communities felt the same.

And they did.

After the Euro elections, the press said this was a flash in the pan. They said that within weeks we'd plummet back in the polls.

But now, their view has changed.

Why?

Because our poll rating has strengthened and solidified. Against all the pundits' expectations. But they don't know the reaction we were all getting on the doorsteps from people who have, for years, said "I would vote for you if I thought you could win". Well, consistently 20% of voters believe we can and will win, and, more importantly believe that Jo Swinson can be our next Prime Minister.

In the brief time that Jo has been Leader, she has transformed the public view of the Lib Dems as a fighting force, a realistic opposition to both the Conservative and Labour parties, both of whom are in terminal decline because of continued in-fighting. And now, she's very clear, in the current

catastrophic crisis, in a General Election there's only one option for those who want to remain – Revoke Article 50.

Jo, you said to us on the day you became Leader that this would be a roller coaster ride – you are right, it is thrilling, exciting, awe-inspiring, and we are behind you all the way!!

I am reminded of one of the songs of my youth, in 1968 – This will be our Year, by the Zombies

Oh go on- bear with me, I'm just a 60s and 70s chick at heart really! The song says:-

The warmth of your love is like the warmth from the sun

And this will be our year – took a long time to come

Don't let go of my hand now the darkness has gone

This will be our year – took a long time to come

And I won't forget the way you helped me up when I was down

And I won't forget.....

Because we must not forget those who kept the faith and kept us going. And I want, in my final speech as your President, to pay tribute especially to Tim Farron and Vince Cable, both of whom had a really tough time as Leader holding us together and rebuilding and preparing us for the success we have had this year. I thank them both for that selfless dedication when perhaps only we believed the Liberal Democrats had a future and the outside world just mocked and derided us.

I also want to thank the many staff who worked against all the odds too. People assume that HQ is this large monolith filled with hundreds of people. Not true. Our few staff are brilliant. Not only doing the job they are paid to do, but also during elections, especially General Elections, redeployed into tasks that keep our successful campaign show on the road.

And it is appropriate therefore for me to thank Nick Harvey, our Chief Executive, who has announced he is leaving us at the end of November. Nick, you have done an amazing job, especially in sorting out our key services

such as compliance,

supervising the staff side of the new discipline process,

and your sage political common sense linking the day-to-day business of the party with the political actions of Lib Dems in parliaments, assemblies and local government.

Thank you!

PAUSE

And what building up we have all been doing.

Membership up over 120,000! And growing daily.

What a reception when we canvas and survey people on the doorstep – a real transformation!

And all your activities with Brexitometers, and working cross party with other Remainers, fighting to Stop Brexit.

This time three years ago Tim Farron was being mocked for saying we wanted a People's Vote, and that we would continue to fight for our place in the EU. Do not underestimate the role that each and every one of you had in changing that narrative. Leading march after march through London, and many other cities and towns, plugging away with those surveys in your towns and communities, fighting election after election, for some winning, for others seeing our poll rating steadily increasing.

PAUSE

But Tim and Vince would be the first to say that they stood on the shoulders of giants, and it is right that we remember some of those who have died in the last year.

And I have to start with Paddy. We will have our formal tribute to him on Tuesday, but the hole left in all our lives by his passing is enormous. At his memorial service at a Westminster Abbey filled to capacity last Tuesday a beautiful tribute was given by Sir John Major. As he said, not perhaps the person you would expect, but it was testament to the statesman that Paddy became that many, many people beyond the Liberal Democrats feel as bereft as we are.

Do you know, I still wait for the hand on the back of my wheelchair in the Lords, and him leaning over saying "Look, Sal, I think we need a chat about..." Those chats, usually about an intractable problems, spoke his military style and approach, and, damn him, he was too often right!

His advice to his successors, always given, not always wanted, usually started with "I have been in your shoes, and I don't want to interfere..." but he did, in his inimitable style.

He changed all of our lives, and many, many that you don't know.

Paddy, you are so sorely missed, but our loss is nothing compared to that faced by Jane and the family and we send them our deepest love and affection.

BRIEF PAUSE

We have also lost other Liberal and Lib Dem giants this last year. Among them, Richard Moore, who received the President's Award two years ago to rapturous applause. An internationalist to his core, his passing was also marked at the Liberal International Executive Committee in July.

And we lost my friend and colleague Geoff Tordoff too. A peer on our benches from 1981 he was a tireless liberal, a great politician and a real gentleman whose warmth and humanity came through no matter what he was doing or who he was speaking to.

Janet Fookes, a stalwart of our local government family for decades and a North Oxford treasure. She was an extraordinary person and role model for any one contemplating public service,

And then there was Pat Wainwright.

A one woman by-election legend, and our agent for many years in Richmond from 1974. Anyone attending a by-election over the last thirty years from Eastbourne to Romsey, will have met her, running HQs, getting volunteers out, ensuring letters were addressed. A force of nature!

We have also lost Sally Horner, a Lib Dem councillor for over twenty years in Horsham, Joyce Arram, who led a life devoted to Liberalism for well over fifty years and Richard Fagence, a Windsor councillor for over 17 years.

Finally, I want to mark the passing of Peter Boizot, better known as the founder of Pizza Express, an entrepreneur and BIG character. He may not have been a councillor, but he was known locally as Mr Peterborough and was much loved for the way he championed his town.

He was also liberal to his finger tips, and used his financial success to back candidates in the party for decades. He owned the Great North Hotel in Peterborough, and hosted – and paid for – our candidate training weekends for many years. He, too, was one of those invisible giants on whose shoulders we sit.

There are others we have lost, too this year, who have been an example to us all.

I want to thank their families and friends for lending them to us, and for their role, even in the darkest time, in keeping Liberalism alive.

PAUSE

So here we are at our crossroads, with not just a growing membership but also a growing parliamentary party.

Over the last few months, our politics has turned upside down. We have watched the founding of Change UK, the split in Change UK, and an ever growing number of independent MPs including 21 thrown out of the Conservative Parliamentary Party earlier this month by a vindictive Prime Minister and his side kick.

We have welcomed Chuka Ummana, Sarah Woollaston, as the standard bearers of a new style of politics, who have been joined by Angela Smith, Philip Lee and Luciana Berger over the last few days.

And the local parties with new MPs – perhaps the first time they have had an incumbent MP since the Lloyd George landslide of 1911 – have warmed to working with their new MP. And the sight of Chuka, Sarah and Luciana already running Minivan whilst canvassing is a joy to behold.

For some of you, this won't have been easy. No matter how much we talk about being a family, to have someone you have opposed for years suddenly becoming one of us, is tough. Find and engage with our new MPs. They have all been on journeys to becoming Liberal Democrats. But they are learning fast!

As a party we are also on a journey too – the broader politics that Jo spoke about in her campaign to become leader, and, indeed our own values.

So we also continue in discussions with what was the Remain Alliance, now Unite to Remain, about possible progressive Remain deals in the next General Election.

To the many local parties we have been discussing specific cases with, I say thank you, especially where things have happened at short notice. Your Federal Board agreed that we needed to make sure that relevant local parties are involved and I am especially grateful to some of our PPCs who have been displaced by a new incumbent MP: their recognition that this is part of the fight for our country's future in Europe, has been totally extraordinary. So my thanks to Richard Kemp, Caroline Voaden, Helen Thompson, Hannah Kitching and Beki Sellick for their generosity of spirit.

PAUSE

I have had the privilege of being your President during the most extraordinary five years, which not one of us could have predicted in 2014.

I don't think that any President has faced two General Elections (so far!), one Referendum, three new Leaders, and two new Chief Execs.

And on top of that, we've had major governance changes to make your Federal Board work strategically, and Federal Committees work more effectively.

We've consulted and made changes to the Discipline System, which was the one thing you all made clear in 2014 we needed to tackle. That new system is now working, and there are only a few complaints started under the old system still to be resolved by the state and regional parties.

Over these five years we've changed the way we campaign. Still out on the streets, but our social media presence has completely changed and – given the small resources compared to others – is outstanding. That is also true of the way we run elections now, much more digital.

But above all, you, the members, still stand up for the party, and stand up against things that you disapprove of. My successor will discover that in your eyes, the President is responsible for absolutely everything that they don't like or has gone wrong.

This has included complaints to me, for example:

To complain that staff haven't replied to an email over a bank holiday weekend

I think my best though is the member who wrote to me to ask me to go and tell the Leader, they're an idiot.

And to remind me, which I never forget, that with senior positions of power and responsibility, liberals always remain suspicious of the establishment, including the President, and I wouldn't have it any other way!

I have learned so much from you over the last five years, but of one thing I remain certain. The democratic way we exist and operate IS the reason that we are united as a party. We can debate, argue, and vote, and whilst there are matters hard fought for, we respect our internal democracy.

PAUSE

At our lowest moments after the 2015 election, I said to you, Conference, to hold the faith. That we would bounce back. That you needed to keep positive, no matter what happened.

We stand at a cross roads of infinite possibilities:

Defending liberalism from nationalist and populists

Defending our country's place in the European Union

Defending our democracy as unscrupulous Prime Ministers try to subvert it

But we are not the defeated party of those years.

We have a strong and growing political presence in Westminster, in the EU and in local Government.

A party that lives its liberal values by welcoming those made homeless in the current political whirlwind because they didn't know they are liberals, but are loving coming home to us

We have in Jo Swinson a Leader who has taken the UK political scene by storm.

And we have, in our party, 120,000 people who believe we can, and will transform our country, whatever our opponents throw at us.

So, back to that Zombies song:-

This will be our year – took a long time to come.

Thank you.