

Siobhan Benita - September 2019 Conference Speech

Hello Conference!

What a brilliant time to be a Liberal Democrat!

I apologise if sound a little horse. I was at the Lib Dem Karaoke last night. When I joined the party 3 years ago nobody told me that I'd be belting out Queen's "Don't Stop me know" with Ed Davey.

But 3 years ago I also never thought we'd have a Prime Minister comparing himself to the Incredible Hulk. Although I guess it's honest for once: a raging, mindless and destructive force whose alter ego is physically weak, socially awkward and emotionally lacking.

Thank you to Jo, Chuka and all my wonderful Lib Dem friends for that introduction.

On the 7th May next year, London voters will make a decision of national and international importance. Who will be the next Mayor of London.

They will decide who they believe embodies the very spirit of London.

- who will stand up for global, liberal, pro-European, warm-hearted and dynamic values.
- who will reflect and reinforce the optimism, diversity and entrepreneurialism of our capital.

I believe – that when asked to decide next year – Londoners will choose the Liberal Democrats.

Londoners will choose me.

Our machine to make it happen is already whirring into action.

From Barnet to Bromley - Camden to Croydon, I have been bowled over by hundreds of amazing, passionate members already helping with my campaign.

And I've had support from across the country as well - from Lib Dems who want to see our capital turn gold.

I'm asking people to choose me as their Mayor, so I want to tell you a bit about myself.

I'm the daughter of migrants.

My mum was born in India. She came to England when she was just ten years old. With my grandma and her two siblings, she undertook a 6-week boat trip in search of a better life.

At one point they had to evacuate and go into life boats because of a fire on board the ship. I can't imagine the fear and hope they – and so many others who travel on boats, planes and lorries – must have felt.

When they arrived, they only knew two people in England – teachers from India - who happened to live in a part of South West London called New Malden so that's where they went.

My home today is two minutes from the first flat they managed to rent, where they lived above a butcher's shop.

My mum tells me about those first months with her family in London.

How the milkman and the butcher used to give them left-over food.

How they found a welcoming and supportive community in the church and local groups.

How people made them feel at home, in extraordinarily difficult and challenging circumstances.

So much of what she tells me about her arrival and first months in London describes the London that I know and love – a charitable city that welcomes people, understands the value of community and supports the most vulnerable.

And my mum gave so much back to the city that had welcomed her. She worked as a carer and auxiliary nurse, always doing an extra last round in the evenings to check that her elderly patients were all ok.

My dad was also a migrant to London. Only he didn't come from quite as far as India! He was born in a small village in Cornwall and came to London to work as a teacher.

My dad was the kind of teacher that children and parents would rush up to whenever we were out shopping just to spend a few minutes talking to him.

I'm sure we can all remember a teacher like that. Someone who went above and beyond the call of duty to care for each and every child. In fact, I'm sure we have teachers like that in the hall here today.

My mum and dad's contributions to society were - like so many public servants - quiet, selfless and yet remarkable. They made people's lives better every single day.

My mum and dad are like hundreds, thousands of people across the capital and the country as a whole. Hard working, law-abiding, kind, generous. And brilliant.

My mum and dad are the reason that my blood boils when I hear the hostility that is directed at immigrants today.

The Conservative and Brexit parties have an awful lot to answer for.

Whether it's Farage's refugee poster, Theresa May's hostile environment, or Boris Johnson's offensive language, the past few years have emboldened the far right and given oxygen to racists and fascists and bigots and extremists.

As Liberal Democrats we can and we must sing from the rooftops.

Immigration is a good thing.

Good for communities.

Good for the capital.

Good for the country.

So we will **always** celebrate London as a magnet to people from all over the world.

Now, if hostility to new migrants is irrational and illiberal...

...then the way this government is treating European citizens who are **already here** in the UK, is nothing short of a disgrace.

Like many of London's EU citizens my husband, who came to London from France over 20 years ago, applied for British citizenship because he feared the EU Settled Status Scheme could become another Windrush scandal. He was right to be concerned.

We have all seen the heart-wrenching stories of people caught up in this mess:

Mrs Brian – Dutch – who is 84 years old and has lived here for 59 years.

Daniel - Belgian - who is head of research at Ofsted and who has lived here for 20 years

Richard - French – a chef and published author – who has lived here for 31 years

And there are hundreds of others – who have been denied residency or settled status or have had some other problem with the scheme.

These are people's lives. And the way they have been mistreated by this Government is scandalous.

Moral arguments aside – the economic arguments for freedom of movement are clear.

London thrives because it's a European as well as a British city.

London is home to 13% of the UK's population but 33% of the country's EU citizens.

A staggering one third of London's jobs in the hospitality and construction sectors are filled by EU citizens. One in twelve in the NHS.

EU citizens build our houses, nurse our sick and pay for our public services.

There is NO Brexit deal that is good for London.

As the Liberal Democrat Candidate for Mayor of London I will fight with every ounce of energy I have to stop Brexit.

And as the Liberal Democrat **Mayor** of London I will also do everything in my power to ensure that our capital remains European and Global, Brexit or no Brexit.

Nothing could symbolise an open London more, than retaining free movement with the EU.

This city needs leadership in defence of free movement and when I'm elected as the first Liberal Democrat Mayor of London it will get it. No ifs, no buts.

The Government tells us it wants an Australian style "points based" immigration system.

Under such systems, a variety of characteristics can be used to qualify people for work visas.

One qualifying characteristic for the right to work in London could be EU citizenship.

I can announce that, as Mayor, I will keep freedom of Movement in London. I will make sure we always have freedom of movement in our great city.

And later this month I will meet MEPs and officials in Brussels to discuss Freedom of movement for Londoners in Europe.

In our kinder London, we will send a message loud and clear that we value everyone's contribution, whether they come from Kingston or Calcutta or Croatia or, like my Dad –from the Duchy of Cornwall.

The Mayoral election is won on personality and values as much as it is on good policy. And our liberal values are at the heart of our campaign.

But the reason I want to be the Mayor of London is because I believe we can create a better, kinder capital.

One in which the air we breathe is not a silent killer.

An affordable and equal city that supports aspiration, is the global capital of business and innovation and the world leader in wellbeing. And we need great policies to do that.

So, I am working with our members, excellent analysts and policy experts to develop our London manifesto and we already have some radical bold ideas.

Sadly, one particular issue that is guaranteed to be a central element of the mayoral campaign is knife crime. Something has gone horribly wrong.

Just this week, three people were fatally stabbed in Camden alone. Every stabbing is a national tragedy and horrific grief for family, friends and community.

The current Mayor and Tory candidate are wasting time on twitter hurling insults at each other while our children lose their lives. Sadiq Khan has wasted an entire mayoral term achieving almost nothing on this issue.

Having been a member of Parliament's Youth Violence Commission I know that there is so, so much more that the Mayor of London can do and yesterday I set out my plan to address serious violence in the capital.

And I was delighted to be joined by Leroy Logan, former Met Chief Superintendent and Sadiq Khan's former policing advisor.

Like me – Leroy understands that the journey to a safer London starts with young people.

Enforcement is an important part of upholding standards, and demanding safety. But enforcement is, by definition, always the result of failure.

Instead we MUST focus on prevention. We need to wrap every child in London with hope, opportunity and guidance. With Love.

My "feel safe, be safe" plan for Londoners will give every young person a voice, activities and the security of good schooling.

1. I will appoint a Young Mayor for London, so that young people's voices are heard every day in City Hall.
2. No child will be permanently excluded from mainstream schools.
3. I will push for a statutory youth service. And I will establish London's youth "happy hour" - where schools, churches, sports clubs and companies will provide safe spaces and enjoyable activities so that no child is vulnerable to crime after school.
4. I will restore effective community policing: every school to have a dedicated officer; and police stations re-opened in the heart of our communities.

5. Finally, but perhaps most significantly, the longstanding Liberal policy of drugs reform MUST begin in London. I will end the failing 'war on drugs' and instead wage war on the criminal gangs and drug lords.

Together these measures will tackle deep rooted problems in our city, and begin to end the tragedies.

Sadiq Khan hasn't given hope to young Londoners. I will.

That is the Liberal Democrat difference.

Friends, we've long said that London is a liberal city. Home to 250 languages, one of the biggest Pride marches in Europe and the biggest annual carnival outside Rio.

Despite that, our Mayoral candidates in the past have struggled to cut through, squeezed by two high-profile individuals, one Labour and one Conservative. This time, that simply won't be the case.

The Conservative is an illiberal candidate in a liberal city. He is also - quite remarkably for someone standing to be Mayor of London, a Brexiter. That didn't go well for Zac Goldsmith and it won't go well for Shaun Bailey.

Sadiq Khan has announced that he will stand again. But what does he stand for?

He has failed to tackle knife crime, he has failed to clean London's toxic air. And, unlike Chuka and Luciana, he continues to prop up a brexit-facilitating, deeply divided Labour party, that has failed to drive out anti-semitism. It's no surprise, therefore, that recent polling shows he has negative satisfaction ratings.

London is looking for change. We, the Liberal Democrats, offer the change our capital needs.

We know, that London, is a Remain city. We know that London is a liberal city.

And Since the Euro elections in May London is also Liberal Democrat city.

In May the capital joined us in saying "Bollocks to Brexit" and returned three Liberal Democrat MEPs. We got more votes than any other party, topping the poll for London and winning outright in sixteen boroughs.

Our best result in the capital ever.

WE are now the popular and credible choice for voters in London.

And it just keeps getting better. Our membership has soared to nearly 24,000 in London. That's three times the number at the last Mayoral election in 2012.

I have a fantastic team around me. I am delighted to be supported by a brilliant and diverse list of London Assembly candidates, headed by City Hall's best campaigner and strongest liberal voice, Caroline Pidgeon.

And we are smarter than ever before with almost 1,000 signed up active volunteers, a truly awesome group of communication professionals, and the richest data we have ever had.

And if we go into a general election our London results will be spectacular.

With our fantastic new MP Chuka Umuna, joining ED Davey and Tom Brake - and some outstanding PPCs in key seats like Wimbledon, Streatham and Twickenham - we are going to deepen and strengthen the Liberal Democrat support across liberal London.

We have the message. We have the momentum. And with all of you, I know that we have the winning campaign.

Imagine what winning the general election will do for our country. Imagine what winning the mayoral election will do for our capital city and for our country.

Imagine the message it will send to the World - Liberal Britain is back!