

## **AUTUMN CONFERENCE SPEECH 2019**

21 years on from my first Liberal Democrat conference, I am thrilled to stand before you today as your leader.

I'm delighted to see so many old friends who have kept the torch of liberalism burning bright through troubled times.

And I'm excited to welcome thousands of new members to our cause, flocking to the Liberal Democrats as the clear rallying point for a movement to create an open, fair, inclusive society.

Over the summer, we showed the others how it's done. We had an energetic and positive leadership contest where many thousands of you engaged.

I want to say a huge thank you to my friend Ed Davey.

Ed, you are a brilliant campaigner, with a superb record of action as Secretary of State for Climate Change. I'm delighted that there's also a promise of more, with you in the key roles of Shadow Chancellor and now Deputy Leader.

Just six months ago at our Spring Conference, few of us would have predicted that our party would be winning on this scale.

For that, we have my two most immediate predecessors to thank.

Tim, who in the days after the European Referendum, knew that our natural place as a party was to unashamedly make the case for Britain to stay in the European Union. Tim, you were absolutely right.

And Vince.

You have served our party - and our country - with such great distinction.

You have so valiantly led the fight to stop Brexit and helped our party soar to new heights.

And I know that the next Parliament will be all the poorer without you by our side.

The voice of reason in these unreasonable times - Vince, from all of us, thank you.

Last autumn conference, I remember standing at the side of the conference hall, next to our dear friend Paddy. He was upbeat, energetic as ever, and as we listened to the debate he leaned over and whispered that we needed to talk about the future of the party. We agreed to have coffee. I wish we had been able to. I wish I could pick up the phone to

ask his advice. I wish he could see our party now. He'd have been in his element.

As I sat last week at his memorial service with thousands of others, we remembered a man who was bold, fearless, determined.

A man who brought people together:

He worked closely with Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair, his eulogy was read by former Conservative Prime Minister John Major.

A man whose impatience to create change was undimmed into his seventies: setting up More United to make space for liberal values to flourish beyond party lines.

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And I looked around and marvelled at Westminster Abbey: the sheer magnificence of scale, the intricate stonework and the colourful beauty of the stained glass. A spirit-lifting place.

And I reflected: before a single stone was laid, someone imagined what was possible.

It stands today as a physical embodiment of what greatness can be achieved: when we raise our sights, and come together with a shared vision.

That spirit of ambition and shared endeavour is what our politics - and our country - needs right now.

Bold.

Fearless.

Determined.

And what a start we have made.

I can't be the only one losing count of our many newly elected representatives.

Beatrice Wishart, our new MSP for Shetland - and the first ever woman elected to Parliament from the Northern Isles.

Our own fabulous Squad of 16 MEPs.

7 new MPs: Chuka, Jane, Sarah, Phillip, Luciana, Angela & Sam.

More than 700 extra Councillors.

And tens of thousands of new members since we last met.

Can everyone who is a new member please stand up or put your hand up?

To you all I say welcome. We all say welcome. And thank you.

Together we are building something special.

So let's keep going. Let's keep growing.

The tired old parties have failed. Looking inward at a time of national crisis.

Our country needs us, at this precarious time.

We do not have ten, or fifteen years. We need to seize the opportunity now.

Let me be clear.

There is no limit to my ambition for our party.

And today I am standing here as your candidate for Prime Minister.

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Because people across Britain deserve a better choice than an entitled Etonian or a 1970s socialist.

Because it is only by having the Liberal Democrats in power that we can build a better future.

Because we owe it to the next generation.

Like Olivia. 14 years old, she wrote to me after I became leader.

She told me what she's doing to help stop Brexit.

She signed up to be a Lib Dem supporter – like twenty thousand others have too.

She's joined gatherings in Liverpool, proudly wearing her pro-European badge.

And she's even travelled to London to go on a People's Vote march.

She writes about how Brexit 'takes away her rights' – she 'never asked to leave the EU'.

Young people like Olivia are being stripped of the opportunities that our generations have enjoyed.

And how powerless they feel as they watch politicians gamble with their lives.

Girls like Olivia. Boys like my own two, Andrew and Gabriel.

People often say to me, how do you do this with two young children?

And of course, it's hard. Parenting is never easy.

But they are why I am standing here. If I can do something to change the future, how could I not do this?

It's why I came back two and a half years ago, in despair at where our country was heading.

When Theresa May called that general election, I knew in a heartbeat that I had to stand and win East Dunbartonshire again.

There is too much at stake.

And I knew that even if there was only the smallest chance that we could change the direction our country had taken, I had to do everything I could to make that happen.

That's why I am here today. That's why you are here too.

Ahead of us we have the fight of our lives for the heart and soul of Britain.

Because, Conference, the next few weeks are about deciding the kind of country we are and who we want to be.

Whether we tackle our biggest challenges with our closest allies or on our own.

Whether we welcome those who want to build a better life in our country or shut the door on them.

Whether we ensure every single child can go on to fulfil their dreams.

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The first task is clear. We must stop Brexit.

And we are crystal clear: a Liberal Democrat majority government will revoke Article 50 on day one.

Because there is no Brexit that will be good for our country.

Europe makes our United Kingdom stronger. But Brexit hurts our family of nations.

For so many, the 2016 referendum ushered in a new kind of politics.

Driven by hate, fear and division.

But for those of us who had lived through the 2014 independence referendum in Scotland, it all felt too familiar.

I am Scottish

I am British.

I am European.

Scottish nationalism and English nationalism would both have me choose. But there is no contradiction.

I am a proud Scot. I love our United Kingdom, and I feel stronger as part of the European family.

And I want to speak directly to people in Scotland.

We together voted overwhelmingly to remain in the European Union and together we can stop Brexit.

We are building a movement across the United Kingdom that is on the verge of stopping it.

You have a part to play in a growing, strengthening, winning campaign across the UK. Join us.

Come with me and be part of the bigger movement for change.

A big vote for the Liberal Democrats in Scotland at the general election will give us the final push that we need.

The energy is with us. So, come with us to stop Brexit.

Last month I visited the border in Northern Ireland.

Something Boris Johnson still hasn't bothered to do.

Those communities remember what it was like to have a hard border.

The man who told me about being detained at a checkpoint for 90 minutes with his wife and new baby, because he came from the wrong part of town.

And despite vague words about unspecified technological solutions, they know that that even the lightest equipment at the border will become a target and it will require security.

They fear that what is currently just a line on the map will once again become a hard border.

And perhaps even more importantly, a dividing line in the mind.

A return to a psychology of us and them, instead of everyone living together, British and Irish identities mixing invisibly.

Our family of nations: Scotland, England, Wales, Northern Ireland.

We are at our best together, looking out to the world, not shutting it out.

It is the Liberal Democrats who will fight to keep our United Kingdom together.

Brexit will put lives at risk.

In the event of a no deal Brexit, doctors are worried about the impact that delays at borders will have on the supply of time-sensitive radiopharmaceuticals.

That's cancer patients waiting longer for scans and treatments as a direct consequence of government policy.

Brexit will hurt our economy.

Thousands of car manufacturing jobs already lost: Honda in Swindon; Jaguar Land Rover in Birmingham; Ford in Bridgend; Nissan in Sunderland. And more, if we leave.

This Brexiteer Government wants to pay for their ideology with other people's jobs.

The truth is they won't be affected, and they won't be there to help, when the redundancy notices are handed out.

They won't be there when the homes are re-possessed, or when the marriages break-down under financial stress.

Which makes what Boris Johnson is doing quite so sickening.

He knows all of this.

We know he knows all of this, because Operation Yellowhammer, the Government's no-deal planning, tells us how bad it's going to be.

But the truth is, you can't plan for no-deal.

Planning for no-deal is like planning to burn your house down.

You might have insurance, but you're still going to lose all your stuff.

But Boris has set himself on this course.

He claims he can negotiate a Brexit deal in a month. I wouldn't hold out much hope, yesterday he failed to negotiate where to have a press conference.

We all know that commitment has never been Boris Johnson's strong suit, but it's clear he's determined when it comes to crashing us out without a deal.

Just look at what he's done over the last few weeks.

He prorogued Parliament to try to prevent MPs stopping a no-deal Brexit.

He's kicked 21 MPs out of the Conservative party, including the Father of the House Ken Clarke, and Churchill's grandson Nicholas Soames.

Just because they dared to stand up to him.

There is even now the suggestion that he would break the law and refuse to ask for an extension to Article 50.

Silencing critics. Purging opponents. Ignoring the law.

For someone who proclaims to hate socialist dictators, he's doing a pretty good impression of one.

And Boris Johnson's insults of choice are rather revealing. Big girl's blouse, girly swot.

But let me tell you conference, if he thinks being a woman is somehow a weakness. He's about to find out: it is not.

When the general election comes, I cannot wait to take on the collective forces of nationalism and populism that will be standing on that debate stage.

Johnson.

Farage.

...and Corbyn.

If he had campaigned to Remain in 2016 with half of the energy he put into the 2017 election, we may have seen a different result.

Then the day after the referendum, he said we should trigger Article 50 immediately. He whipped his MPs to vote for it.

And even now, when faced with all the clear and obvious dangers that Brexit brings, Jeremy Corbyn still insists that if Labour win a General Election, they will negotiate their own Brexit deal to take us out of the EU.

Nigel Farage might be Brexit by name, but it is very clear that Jeremy Corbyn is Brexit by nature.

My dad was a huge influence on my life.

He encouraged me to believe that we can change things for the better.

He encouraged me to challenge the way things are.

And above all, he taught me always to keep learning, to be curious, to ask questions.

Actually, that's what any good liberal does.

Because we can't make progress if we aren't prepared to question the world around us.

To challenge vested interests, and concentrations of power.

To imagine that a different world is possible.

And that's how the liberal tradition has always been a breeding ground for new ideas.

It was Gladstone's minister W. E. Forster who asked why any child should miss out on education, and made parents send their children to school.

It was David Lloyd George who asked why the most vulnerable in society are left to fend for themselves, and paved the way for the welfare state.

It was Beveridge who asked why anyone should have to pay for healthcare, and masterminded our beloved NHS.

It was Paddy Ashdown who asked whether it is inevitable that modern economies destroy the natural environment, and put the Liberal Democrats at the forefront of green thinking.

Liberal Democrats, we come from a long line of innovators.

So when we were in government, we asked why any child should go hungry at school, and we introduced universal free school meals.

We asked why babies should only have one parent take care of them in their first year of life, and we designed shared parental leave.

And we asked why the state should judge what kind of love is acceptable, and we made same sex marriage legal. Because love is love.

Now, we need to do it again because our country needs us.

The world around us is changing fast, and we need to be bold, unconstrained by conventional wisdom.

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And my first question is this.

Why is our success as a country reduced to a GDP figure?

We have been conditioned to believe that as long as GDP keeps growing, everything is fine.

But this ignores the reality behind the numbers.

That the social contract is broken – that working hard and playing by the rules is no longer enough to guarantee a better life.

That our planet is at breaking point.

GDP measures how often we replace our clothes, our cars and our computers.

How many Young Offenders Institutions we build for children without hope.

How much diesel pollutes our air and damages our lungs.

When it comes to GDP, Bobby Kennedy was spot on fifty years ago.

*It measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile.*

That's why a Liberal Democrat government will put the wellbeing of people and our planet at the heart of what we do.

And this Autumn, we will set out our own wellbeing budget.

Others around the world are doing this already.

Take Jacinda Ardern.

Thanks to her, the New Zealand government set out the world's first wellbeing budget.

I want the UK to follow that example.

I want us to fundamentally rethink the purpose of our economy.

So that it works for people and our planet.

Our wellbeing budget will spell out our priorities for public spending on the things that matter most – both right now and for future generations.

And my wellbeing ambition extends well beyond government spending.

The whole of our society – including business – should work towards building the kind of country we want.

People and our planet will thrive with the Liberal Democrats in power.

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And, Conference, how can we look our children in the eye if we don't act now to tackle the climate crisis?

We are the last generation that can stop irreversible damage to our environment.

Earlier this year Parliament declared a climate emergency, but what has the Government done since then?

We've set off the fire alarm, and now they are just standing by, watching it burn.

Literally. For days we watched the Amazon – the world's lungs – just burn.

While back at home, we have children whose lungs don't develop properly because of air pollution in our towns and cities.

The climate emergency is an existential threat and only our party has the bold, detailed plan to tackle it.

A Liberal Democrat Government will plant the trees and retrofit the homes.

We will build the wind turbines, the solar panels and the tidal barrages.

But Government alone cannot solve this. It will take all of us – government, individuals and business – to build the zero-carbon UK we need to become.

That's why my Liberal Democrat Government will introduce climate risk reporting and create a new Green Investment Bank, to channel investment into green projects and away from fossil fuels.

And it's why I want to engage everyone in the country by establishing a UK Citizens' Climate Assembly to drive a national debate about how exactly we will reach net-zero by 2045 - and earlier if possible

We will do it all, not because it will create thousands of good new jobs – although it will; not because it will cut energy bills – although it will; not because it will make our country a cleaner, richer, happier nation – although it will.

We will do it because we have to.

Because, as the placards say, there is no Planet B.

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And, Conference, where is our outrage when the lives of young people are being cut so short?

Earlier this year, I saw first-hand the heartbreak that follows in the wake of a fatal stabbing.

Together with Pauline Pearce I visited the beautiful shrine built for Tashaûn by his family and friends, after he was stabbed to death.

The shrine was full of flowers, photographs, messages, and some of his favourite things too, a skateboard, his hat, cans of his favourite fizzy drink.

Tashaûn was just 15-years old.

And while we were stood there, some of his friends came by. Taking a break from their GCSE revision. Mourning their friend, instead of worrying about their exams – like every other teenager.

Tashaûn was clearly so loved.

We need a public health approach to tackling the knife crime epidemic in our communities – as we've seen in Glasgow.

When I was first elected back in 2005, Glasgow was crowned the murder capital of Europe, with 39 people killed in the city that year.

Around the same time, the city decided to take a public health approach to knife crime.

So the Violence Reduction Unit was set up, working with schools, hospitals and job centres to tackle violence.

In effect, it means doing more than just dealing with the physical consequences of knife crime.

It means treating violent behaviour as an epidemic that spreads across a community, just like we would with a disease.

And the results have been spectacular.

Since 2005, the murder rate in Glasgow has dropped by 70%.

Schools, hospitals, job centres and police working together to eradicate this violence from our communities.

But to win this battle, we need to invest far more in providing young people with good youth services.

Being a teenager isn't easy, and it's become a hell of a lot harder because young people have nowhere to go. They need places where not only they can hang out with their friends, but they can also get the support they need when things go wrong.

That's why the Liberal Democrats will give local authorities the funding they need so that they can all provide youth services and re-establish youth workers.

Because every time a life like Tasha's is cut short, we are failing our young people. And it must stop now.

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Conference, one of the things I am most proud of from our time in the Coalition is how hard we fought for better mental health services.

And I am so proud of all the work that Norman Lamb has done over the years.

Norman's campaigning zeal and unwavering determination to put mental health on the agenda have been second to none.

And I am so glad he'll continue his work outside of Parliament, because we still need to do so much more for mental health.

Because, Conference, why should any child travel as much as 339 miles to get a mental health bed – that's from here to Durham?

A child who is so ill that they need to be hospitalised, forced to leave family and friends behind just to get the treatment they need.

Why have we as a society decided that that is something we can't change, and that we should just accept it?

A Liberal Democrat government will ringfence funding for mental health services.

And we will invest far more heavily in the childhood and adolescent mental health services that communities need.

Conference, I won't stand here and pretend I have all the answers for what happens next.

There are enough know-it-all politicians around, and the more I get to see of them, the more obvious it is that they actually know nothing.

But this much I am sure of.

The opportunity in front of us is huge. And it is for the taking.

We can win. We must win. And to do so, we must build the biggest liberal movement this country has ever seen.

We cannot be satisfied with a place on the fringes of British politics, narrow and pure, small and irrelevant.

Our job is to gather the forces of liberalism, and be the rallying point for change.

We must be welcoming and inclusive, recognising the journey fellow travellers are on.

Together we can create a tipping point – and transform our society.

My vision for our country is one where every single person is valued and included.

A country where people work hard and are rewarded - with a decent home, enough money to meet their needs and live with dignity.

Where every baby born is given the security and love they need to face the world with confidence.

Where every child can play and learn about the world, free from worry and stress.

Where every young person is nurtured and supported in the path they choose.

Where people work in good jobs, for decent wages, in flexible ways, in a culture of mutual respect.

Where experience is shared across the generations, listening to the wisdom of years, while channelling the enthusiasm of youth.

Where we support vulnerable people: both those whose circumstances mean they will always be vulnerable, and every single one of us who may be vulnerable at some point: whether through illness or grief, redundancy or trauma, new parenthood or old age.

Where we make it easier for people to live in good health, and people know that our excellent NHS is always there when they need it.

Where people can be themselves, respected for who they are, no matter what god they pray to or none, the colour of their skin, or who they love.

Where everyone knows they can make a contribution to society – and this is measured by creativity and compassion, laughter and love, innovation and inspiration, more than by money.

Where enterprise and business is celebrated, because it acts as part of the solution, not part of the problem.

Where we respect the natural world, this planet, our only home. And we act with the urgency required to live within our environmental means, because we will not leave our children a poisoned planet.

Where we love our country. Our wonderful United Kingdom. Our strong family of nations: Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland, who have achieved so much together, and will not be ripped apart.

Where we take our place in the wider world with responsibility, with respect for ourselves - and for other nations too.

Only a Liberal Democrat government can deliver the fair, inclusive and open future that we deserve.

At the next general election, voters will choose the kind of country we want to be.

Insular, closed, and selfish.

Or collaborative, open and generous.

A politics of fear, hate and division.

Or one of respect, hope and inclusion.

Liberal Democrats, we can build the broad, open, liberal movement that our country needs.

We can defeat nationalism and populism.

We can change our politics, stop Brexit and win a brighter future.