

Vince Cable

Building a Liberal Democrat Movement

As Leader, Vince delivered a speech on his plans to build a strong liberal and democratic movement in Britain.

7th Sept 2018



We returned this week from Parliament's long summer recess. I used the break to give some thought as to the role my party should be playing in the British political system.

The country is bitterly divided over Brexit and the politics of the main parties leaves millions of voters, broadly those in the 'centre ground', feeling ignored while they get on with their internal civil wars.

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And little attention is being paid to some of the big long-term challenges around climate change, an ageing population, new technologies and stagnant productivity.

To be sure, the sense of political malaise is not unique to the UK. Ever since the global financial crisis, frustration over the failure of market economies to deliver rising living standards, and a sense of unfair rewards, has fed the politics of extremism. Parties in the liberal and social democratic traditions have struggled.

Liberal democracy itself is under threat notably in the USA, in Eastern Europe and perhaps here. Authoritarians and extremists of both right and left are on the march and are coordinating their tactics and propaganda: an Illiberal International.

The problem is obviously not the same everywhere and in some countries – France, Canada, Ireland – there are encouraging counter-currents and we need to learn from them.

But in Britain there is the additional problem of a first-past-the-post voting system which entrenches the position of the two established major parties.

This system has worked after a fashion when politicians aimed for common ground. But when, as now, the main parties are driven by their party fringes, politics becomes dangerously polarised.

And when democracy also seems unable to deliver, the frustration opens up a space for various forms of ugly populism. The summer of 2018 offered us verbal attacks on Muslims and Jews as the staple of political debate. And, of course, wall to wall Brexit.

It is a worrying picture. So, as Leader of the Liberal Democrats, I have naturally asked myself how I, and my party, can help protect, and develop liberal democracy in Britain, at a time when it is in grave danger. Perhaps the gravest since the 1930s.

I see two big steps we need to take:

First, I want to bring values back into our politics providing a rallying point for those who are committed to defend liberal democracy; challenge extremes of inequality and barriers to opportunity; uphold our civil liberties; maintain an open, outward looking country and protect our environment.

My colleagues and I have sought over the last year to demonstrate how we can put those values into action in respect of the economy and tax policy, the housing crisis, schooling, the new data technologies, the governance of companies, and much else.

And it reassuring to know that these instincts are shared not by a few in this country but by many. In fact, recent research indicates that about 40% of voters share the essential values of the Liberal Democrats.

Secondly and crucially to making those things happen, I want to work with our party – its governing board, and the membership – to transform the way we work with people so that we engage more actively with the millions of voters who currently share our values but feel disenfranchised.

We start from a low base after the disappointing 2015 and 2017 elections. These in turn stem from the political damage done in the years of Coalition – which was good for the country but bad for the party – and from the relentless squeeze on third parties in the current 'first past the post' system.

But undaunted we have battled on.

In the year since I took over the leadership we have made impressive strides to restore our position in local government – with the best results for fifteen years – and better ones are anticipated next year.

Despite the limited opportunities offered in Parliament and in the conventional media, we are registering improvements in our overall rating and I am confident that, if we continue on the present trajectory, we will make definite progress in numbers of seats.

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But I came into the leadership just over a year ago with great ambitions for the party. I want

us to do better than 'steady as she goes' slow growth. And given the unhappy state of the country's politics it would be unforgivable simply to sit tight and hope for gradual improvement.

That requires us to remake ourselves in the public mind.

We must realise the party's ambition to build our core support, by opening our arms to that huge swathe of the electorate which shares our values. We must invite people in.

I see our Party as the vehicle for giving voters real influence every day as part of a new movement.

Let me say a little about what I mean.

WE MUST MAKE IT EASIER TO GET ON BOARD

One example we should look positively at is that of the Canadian Liberals who rose from being a distant third party to becoming the party of government, in one leap.

Even within the outdated first past the post system, their party engineered a massive increase in their public recognition and participation by turning themselves into a broadly based 'movement' which then became the basis for general election campaigning.

Of course, Canada is not Britain and although their political system is closer to ours than – say – France, we cannot simply adopt a 'copy and paste' approach.

What I'm setting out today is a starting point for that endeavour, and it is one on which every Liberal Democrat member will have their say.

I SEE ESSENTIALLY THREE STEPS TO REFORMING THE PARTY:

The first is to widen membership with a new class of 'supporters' who pay nothing to sign up to the party's values. They should enjoy a range of entitlements, including the right to vote in leadership and to shape the party's campaigning online.

The Lib Dems already have an army of voluntary helpers and deliverers, as well as 200,000 online supporters over and above our 100,000 members, who loosely identify with us and campaign with us but currently have no say.

The Party is already consulting with its members on opening up a supporter scheme, starting at conference next weekend. There are necessarily tricky issues balancing the entitlements of members and supporters.

Like many Leaders before me, I may be asking the party's structures to go further and faster than their natural pace – and there will be a dialogue about how best to make such a scheme work.

Whatever rights our new supporters gain, we as a party aim to be in constant conversation with them, engaging them in campaigns and urging them to begin campaigns of their own.

Now groups like More United, 38 Degrees, Avaaz and Change.org, have shown us how these regular conversations can happen, how we can engage hundreds of thousands of people online.

What I want is for our party to do that, and to offer our movement a political arm within Parliament. So, it is not just a protest group on the outside banging at the door, but a mass movement with a voice on the inside – our parliamentary party.

Liberals pioneered this model at a local level as community politics in the latter half of the twentieth century; now I want us to use the power of technology to pioneer it online in our national political system too.

I appreciate that we are not the first party to have sought to adapt in this way. The Five Star Movement, now in government in Italy, started like this. The Labour Party's Momentum movement has been highly successful in mobilising and engaging young people.

We are a centre-ground, pro-European, liberal and social democratic party, welcoming like-minded supporters.

But the way in which the revolutionary left hijacked the Labour Party, and used Momentum for its own purposes, is a salutary warning. And the Tories are being taken over by extremists even with a narrow, exclusive, membership base.

We have to be careful but we cannot be afraid of opening windows lest a few flies get in. In any case, the Liberal Democrats are different.

We are not a socialist party concerned with extreme-left entryism, or a right-wing party trying to keep extreme right-wingers out.

We are a centre-ground, pro-European, liberal and social democratic party, welcoming like-minded supporters.

This will be a Movement for Moderates!

Second, and in the same spirit, the party should in my view be more open to new members or converts from other parties playing an active role as candidates.

At present we have a delay of up to 12 months before a new member can apply to become a parliamentary candidate. This leaves people frustrated – at the moment of their greatest political enthusiasm, we erect an arbitrary barrier to their progress. If they are good enough, and can get approved, they should be able to stand for Parliament on a Liberal Democrat ticket and to do so without delay.

In addition, there are over 9,000 council seats to contest next year, so I want to make it easy for those who share our values to stand as candidates at that level too.

A third step is open up the party leadership to a wider field than MPs by allowing party members to put themselves forward. There would, of course, be an approval and shortlisting process, run by the party, to make sure that anyone putting themselves forward shared the essential values of the party and had the political capability for the job.

I am lucky to have excellent parliamentary colleagues, any one of whom could lead the party in future – and I believe none of them has anything to fear from a big, open field in which to compete.

The truth is that there are many talented people with proven leadership ability – in the

professions, the armed forces, the voluntary sector and business – and who share our values but who have not pursued a parliamentary career.

I have served in Parliament for two decades, been a candidate ten times, a winner five times and am proud to represent my constituents.

But I can understand why many others are deterred from trying to follow suit. And the present parliament, where large numbers – perhaps a majority of MPs – are voting on Brexit against their own judgement and their assessment of the national interest is not exactly a good advertisement. The fact is that our current parliamentary system is severely damaged, if not broken, and a forward-looking party has to look outside as well as inside.

My intention therefore is to ensure that the next Leader is chosen from the widest possible pool of talent and to put him or her at the helm of a far bigger, more open, movement than any previous leader has been.

I recognise the potential difficulties of resourcing a leader from outside the Commons, and of having someone who is not based on the doorstep of the Westminster media. But we should not let operational matters and long-held constitutional traditions constrain our thinking and our choices.

Instead, I want to work with the party through the coming consultation to ensure we have solutions to the problems people raise.

WE HAVE TO ENGAGE IN PARTY REALIGNMENT

We also have to recognise that – despite our best efforts – the Liberal Democrats may not be the only centre-force in British politics in the coming years. It's the worst kept secret in Westminster that political disquiet in the two big parties is provoking some people to consider the formation of a new party of the centre ground, or several.

This requires us to demand better than the usual tribalism...of ourselves and of our partners.

The biggest challenge will arise if a significant number of Labour or Conservative MPs leave or are forced out of their parties.

It is patently clear from the open contempt shown for many Labour MPs by Jeremy Corbyn's hard left supporters that a schism is likely. Some Conservatives are in a similar position. Meanwhile, there is a smattering of business people around talking in hushed tones about a new party.

I have met with some of these people to argue the case that it's easier in our electoral system to work with existing party structures, and with people who have a set of shared values, than to try to compete. We hang together or we hang separately.

There is a danger in becoming like the scene in Monty Python's *Life of Brian* where the Judean People's Front refuses to work with the People's Front of Judea for the most petty of reasons.

But this is not a Monty Python sketch, it is the future of our country.

History will not forgive anyone whose pride causes them to turn away the hand of friendship

when we should be building a credible popular movement of the centre.

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That means we in the Liberal Democrats are open to working together with those who share our values.

But by opening up our party, I hope to convince those who agitate for a new force that there is already a strong movement for open, centrist, and internationalist politics: it is the Liberal Democrats.

My invitation is for them to join us in a party where we are ready to work with people of similar values, even where we don't agree on everything. Join us in a force which already has a foothold in the first past the post system, a nationwide organisation, and an army of hundreds of thousands of foot soldiers mobilised against Brexit.

By drawing in a broad range of supporters, encouraging new voices to stand for political office, and re-imagining the leadership of our party, the Liberal Democrats can become a voice for millions of British voters working together in a positive political movement.

To conclude, I am determined to lead the Liberal Democrats through this, turning us into a genuinely remade, new force.

From the fourth party in the House of Commons, to the first party in the minds of the country – and a contender once again for government.

But in calling for such change in political thinking and practice I am aware that the question will be asked as to whether this is my 'last hurrah'.

I do not wish to emulate Gladstone who kept going into his mid-80s nor any wish to outlast Robert Mugabe.

Yet I still have four clear objectives, which I intend to see through:

I want to ensure we remain the leading voice against Brexit, demanding a People's Vote

I want to ready the party for any general election emerging out of the Brexit chaos and lead us through it

I want to lead it to further local election success in May, rebuilding the local government base on which both community politics and parliamentary advances are founded

And – crucially to the others – I want to begin the process of transforming the Liberal Democrats from an old-style political party into a new, open movement.

That means reports of my imminent departure are wide of the mark and now is certainly not the time for an internal election. There is serious work for our party to do.

To that end, once Brexit is resolved or stopped – which may well take a long time – and if the new rules are agreed, that will be the time to conduct a leadership contest under the new rules.

You could be the leaders of tomorrow.

I invite all those who believe in a big centre-ground, liberal movement in British politics to join us.

You could be the leaders of tomorrow.

Whoever is chosen in the future will lead not a small party, but a big movement.

And the Liberal Democrats will offer a force for good. A Movement for Moderates, battling against Brexit, and standing up for fairness and opportunity against power and privilege in our country.

So I invite all the millions of liberal, centre-ground voters out there who share those values, and who want to change our politics, to sign up on our website today. So that we can fight for liberal values together.

We will defend liberal values together, with all the zeal and intensity of those who would have taken Britain down a different path.

This is a battle we must wage for the good of the country, and it is am determined we will win. ■