

Vince Cable

Conference Leader's Speeches

Vince's final speech as leader in York Conference (Spring) 2019



THE ROMANS

It is a sobering thought that just under 2,000 years ago there were people gathered on this spot no doubt complaining about a treaty from Rome.

...with tiresome regulations about daily baths and straight roads; muttering under their breath that these legionnaires should go back to Gaul or Carthage.

And you would have heard lots of people saying *Interum sumo inferium*. For those amongst you who don't converse in classical languages, that means: take back control!

It then took them over 300 years to get their 'Rexit, when the Romans went home.

That's the kind of timescale Theresa May seems to be working on.

It then took about 700 years for York to recover from this early Brexit.

Eventually it did, mainly thanks to French newcomers. They and their descendants left much that is beautiful in this city, like the Minster.

But there are also reminders of past ugliness. Only a few hundred yards away from here one of Britain's early displays of organised antisemitism when Yorkshire's Jews were rounded up, locked up in Clifford's Tower and burned to death.

That the country should still be battling the scourge of anti-Semitism today is a terrible reflection on our society.

And after this weekend's horrors in New Zealand, Islamophobia is another scourge, indulged by populists and conspiracy theorists – with terrible consequences.

But back to my home city. York is where my life, and my upbringing and my political career began.

I have fond memories as a returning native, and I am heartened that York now enjoys a luxury which I hope will soon be more widely shared: a Lib Dem-led council.

And it is a place which is proud of its traditions and identity as a great British city, but open and welcoming to outsiders.

York University, a symbol of that openness, welcomed as its first ever student, in 1963, a young woman from Kenya who a few years later became my wife.

And, by the way, the city voted to Remain.

REMAIN

Brexit is dominating the life of Parliament and the country and not in a good way.

It is dividing families, communities, and even the United Kingdom and sucking the energy out of government.

Last week's farcical debates have diminished even further the standing of Parliament.

Many of the really big issues which will dominate the future – how we live sustainably; how we adapt to and control a new generation of technologies; how we plan for our ageing population – all of these are being put on one side: postponed, ignored, neglected.

I am not surprised that growing numbers of people are simply reacting with a mixture of boredom and anger: boredom because the same arguments are being advanced with robotic regularity; anger because what we were told would be very simple and straightforward is, in reality, hideously complicated.

I am proud of the role our party has played, unapologetically leading the case for Remaining for an Exit from Brexit through securing and then winning a People's Vote. Against all the odds, our cause is very much alive.

We have been quite clear that the 2016 referendum, now more than 2½ years ago, was not a good basis for leaving. It was undertaken solely to satisfy an internal quarrel inside the Conservative Party. A narrow majority of voters, and only 37% of the electorate, voted to Leave.

Facts change, and they have changed. We also now understand much better the scale of the cheating and lying, which went on to secure the result.

Without a confirmatory referendum there will be no such thing as the 'settled will of the people': merely a feud without end.

I remain astounded that some people claim a new referendum would be undemocratic. What is democracy if it is not the right for a country to change its mind?

I, myself, serve as an illustration of this principle. In 2015, I was defeated in the General Election and lost my seat. Two years later, in another election, they told me on the doorsteps, and the in the privacy of the voting booth, that they had had a change of heart and I got back with a near 10,000 majority.

Twickenham changed its mind. Britain is now changing its mind too.

And anyone who imagines that getting Theresa May's proposed Brexit through Parliament at the – third, fourth, fifth – time of asking will bring closure and stability is suffering from serious self-delusion.

The Withdrawal Agreement – the divorce – is the easy bit.

If Brexit is a political Everest, we have only just got to the Base Camp.

The brief, vague, woolly, Political Declaration doesn't even tell us where the summit is, let alone how to get there. It promises years and years of frustration and friction.

We keep being told, not least by the Chancellor, that once Brexit is agreed and delivered, the fog of uncertainty will lift and there will be a surge of renewed confidence in the UK.

Business investment will pour in. We will all live happily ever after.

But this is a triumph of political fantasy over economic reality. Any well-run business can see that chronic uncertainty would follow any endorsement of the Withdrawal Agreement.

The cliff edge would merely have been postponed for 20 months. Not a great offer.

But it isn't just about business, and economics, important though they are.

As an MP for a university area, containing one of the leading scientific research centres in the country, I see a generation's worth of work going up in smoke.

Pan-European teams; the free movement of students and staff and crucial research funding... are all being seriously damaged.

And we are turning our backs on the most successful peace project in European history; a project which brought democracy to Southern European military dictatorships and then to the former communist countries of the East.

That is why Europe is worth fighting for.

That is why we will continue to fight to Remain.

Whatever happens in the next few weeks of parliamentary twists and turns, we must argue that none of the many, mutually exclusive versions of Brexit now on offer – soft or hard – are as good as the deal we currently have.

To those outside the Westminster bubble, the parliamentary games on Brexit are baffling: a weird combination of snakes and ladders, chess and all-in wrestling.

So I want to pay tribute to our anti-Brexit parliamentary team, led by Tom Brake, Sarah Ludford and Dick Newby, who together have helped us ensure that we are in the right place on the panopoly of Brexit legislation.

I am grateful, too, to all of you. You keep campaigning; You never give up; You continue to believe we can win this historic argument.

I am looking forward to joining you and leading you once again in a show of Liberal Democrat strength on the march next weekend.

Together we will make a statement, on the streets, that the fight continues, and can be won.

I got into some hot water with some of you last year, suggesting that ours might be a 'movement for moderates'.

Naturally, we are – economically – in the centre; supporters of private enterprise, unafraid of active government.

But in the new world of identity politics, we are on one side, not in the mushy middle. We are Remain.

The choice between good and bad, right and wrong, isn't to split the difference.

As King Solomon once observed: you don't settle a dispute on the parentage of a baby by splitting it down the middle.

In a world of Trumps, Le Pens, and Putins...

...the new champions of nationalism and Xenophobia... we are firmly on the other side.

We are Remain. We are internationalist, liberal, outward looking.

If there is one issue which exposes the motives of British politicians today, it is the current bitter arguments over the 'Irish backstop'.

For the hard Brexiteers, the pure identity of the United Kingdom as a 'sovereign' entity – which can do what it likes and close its mind to the world – is more important than peace, trade, and prosperity.

For them, our shared history with Ireland is irrelevant; of second order to their own obsessions with nationalism.

And to make things worse, this government is so lacking in talent that it employs a Secretary of State for Northern Ireland who makes even Chris Grayling look like a serious figure.

Karen Bradley says she doesn't understand sectarian voting patterns, and then compounds this public declaration of ignorance with a blatantly and naively one-sided view of the killings in the Troubles. Ireland, like Czechoslovakia in pre-war days, is seen as a faraway country of which they know nothing and care less.

She has revealed an ugly truth: that peace in Ireland matters less than peace in the Conservative Party.

CAUSES

But just as we are committed to fighting the consequences of Brexit, we are committed to tackling the underlying causes. That isn't straightforward.

We shouldn't be seduced by the lazy clichés and the simple idea that Brexit was caused by deprivation. In fact, some of Britain's poorest cities voted to Remain. And many of the most

prosperous towns and villages, in the South voted Leave.

But there was a clear pattern of towns in the North, the Midlands, Wales, and coastal England which felt neglected and voted Leave to give the Government, and the wider establishment, a good kicking.

Government must invest heavily in the infrastructure and public services in former industrial or mining or seaside towns.

I have set out in a pamphlet, which will be available as you leave, my ideas about how government should approach this.

It may not be the most exciting bedtime reading, but it should provide some material for the train home!

The big challenges which my booklet addresses have been obscured not just by Brexit, but by the upheaval in Britain's two main parties.

The Conservative Party was, until recently, a broad church; but now it is narrowing to a party of English nationalism. The UKippers are quietly taking over that hollowed out, geriatric, structure and those that don't fit in are being pushed aside.

This is a mirror image of what has already happened to the Labour Party.

Ever since the Labour civil war 40 years ago, which led to the social democratic split, there has been an unresolved conflict between revolutionary and democratic socialism.

And now there is a nasty twist; the anti-Semites who feed off the conspiracy theories of the 'far left' are back. Reminding us that there is more that unites the far left and far right than divides them.

But the problems of the Labour Party are not just a problem for them, but for all of us.

There are millions of Conservative voters who are disgusted with the incompetence, the self-indulgence and the inhumanity of this Tory Government but so long as Labour appears to be a nightmare, they will cling to the Tory nurse, for fear of something worse.

THE CENTREGROUND

The question I have been asked from the day I took on this job is "why don't the Liberal Democrats fill the political space created by these extremes?" I believe we should, we can and we will.

But anybody who thinks it's straight forward to rush in and fill this so called 'centre ground' will soon encounter the barrier of which we are all too painfully aware. The first past the post voting system.

Every parliamentary constituency and council seat in England and Wales is fought on this basis, crushing the life out of insurgent parties trying to operate as if they were in Holland or Sweden, where there is proportional voting.

Dozens of new parties have been registered in the last couple of years, many claiming to be the Holy Grail of the 'Centre Ground'.

They need to ask themselves a simple question: why isn't the Women's Equality Party running

the country? With a potential voter base of over half the population; many sensible policies; lots of committees; a clear, attractive, brand; and some nice people...but they haven't got anyone elected.

They can't get over the hurdle of 'first past the post'. So, when people tell me that a new force can win in France, why not here, the prosaic answer is: this isn't France.

We don't have a Presidential system; and we don't have a transferable vote.

REALIGNMENT

These are the problems and we are all too familiar with them. But there's no reason for giving up.

The massive challenge we face now is to create an alternative to the politics of fear and division; which has attractive, liberal and social democratic values; but is also grounded in the political reality and experience of winning in the current system and running things well at local and national level.

This year's local elections must be the place where we finally shake off the set-back of two damaging general elections, and regain confidence, building on the advances of the last year. We can and will.

The environment in which we do so has now changed. We are seeing early signs of some realignment. The breakaway group of independent MPs is a sign of that.

I have been very clear that we must welcome a realignment of British politics and the opportunities it presents. I have also been clear that we should offer the hand of friendship to those who want to work with us rather than against us.

Most of their statements of policy could have been cut and pasted from ours. But these are early days.

The new group has a following wind from people who are curious about something new, and who admire their decision to break with their parties. But there is nothing yet beyond Westminster.

No local infrastructure. No local base.

They are very exposed to a wipe out in an early election. We aren't. As Tim Farron once observed, we would survive as cockroaches would survive a nuclear war. Speaking as Chief Cockroach, I would prefer a more flattering metaphor, but his point is well made.

But I think we can do more than survive. We can do much more and much better by working with them and others who share our values, to take on the decaying and dysfunctional Labour and Conservative party machines, which have dominated British politics for far too long.

The fringe this weekend where Jo Swinson welcomed Anna Soubry to conference was a very positive step.

FRUSTRATION

One of the reasons that there appears to be some public appetite for something new is

frustration with the relentlessly negative and adversarial nature of British politics. There was some tut-tutting in the party when I forged an agreement with the Green Party covering national and local elections in my part of London.

One irate member told me that he was appalled that I was collaborating with people whose stance on NATO and nuclear weapons was different from ours. But the public liked the collaboration and rewarded both our parties.

And anyway, I'd suggested that nuclear weapons weren't a great help in devising environmentally sensible traffic management in Twickenham.

PADDY ASHDOWN

And in a year when we remember with gratitude and affection the legacy of Paddy Ashdown it is worth recalling his last major political initiative which was to establish More United; bringing together politicians of different parties, much as he sought to do with the semi-formal alliance he – and we – had with Tony Blair's Labour Party in 1997.

In the event, the nature of Corbyn's Labour Party kills off meaningful frontbench collaboration. But Paddy's instincts were right: the organisation has gone on to unite backbenchers on opposite sides of the traditional divide.

And let me be clear: I identify with this approach to politics and I believe it is part of our duty to Paddy's legacy to promote it.

Our mission to move from survival to success, from protest back to power, takes place in a world where liberal values are under siege and in retreat.

Nothing quite defines liberalism like its opposite, illustrated by Theresa May's policies on immigration.

Slamming the door on refugees, including children. Threats of deportation for decades-long legal residents who don't have the right papers. No appeal against arbitrary refusal of visas. Separation of partners from their loved ones. Using landlords, teachers and health professionals to create a hostile environment of suspicion of those who sound and look different. Depriving the destitute of the right to work.

What a sad state of affairs that our main safeguard against Home Office tyranny is its own chronic inefficiency.

Immigration is a touchstone issue which has defined liberals from long before Theresa May stepped into the Home Office.

I recall the panic half a century ago when a British government slammed the door on British subjects from Kenya, including my late wife's family and friends.

Only a small group, led by the then Liberal Party opposed the government.

And you may remember that one of Paddy's great campaigns was the then – unpopular – defence of the rights of Hong Kong Chinese, who faced loss of their citizenship.

As we forge a new politics, we must never lose our edge on this issue. We do not argue that immigration should be unlimited or unmanaged but we will never give in to populism.

Ours will always be a distinctive voice, speaking up for the benefits of migration to our society and our economy; and our party will always open its arms to refugees when others turn their backs.

It may be uncomfortable for many people of my generation but there is an enormous gap in attitudes and interests opening up between the old and the young.

That is true of Brexit where an overwhelming majority of young people voted Remain, and most of the two million who have turned 18 since would do so now.

It is also true of the environment. There is now a climate emergency. But you wouldn't think so from the complacent attitude of the government, which has quietly dumped the relentless focus on carbon reduction, which we maintained when Ed Davey was Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change;

Whether it is the short-sighted cancellation of the Swansea Tidal Lagoon Project or the cynical sell-off of the Green Investment Bank, Conservative Ministers are frankly put to shame by the children who have walked out of school to put the future of the planet first.

I believe there are four other issues which matter above all.

The first is housing. Housing inflation has created paper millionaires of large numbers of older home owners who have repaid their mortgages. Young families by contrast are forced into insecure, unsatisfactory and often exploitative rented accommodation.

We are, therefore, committed to massive affordable house building of social and private homes, as an absolute priority. And that, in turn, means breaking the existing model of developer-led housing which depends on rising land prices and grotesque profits and bonuses.

The second issue is the wave of violent crime. The victims are overwhelmingly young and male (and often black).

What is clear is that cuts to police have undermined crime prevention; diminishing their ability to gather intelligence and to catch perpetrators.

I started my involvement in politics 50 years ago representing a tough ward in Glasgow. Gang violence was endemic; the weapons of choice were open razors and broken bottles; and the catalyst was drink rather than drugs.

Glasgow was once a far more violent place than inner London. Today the city is leading the way in treating knife crime as a public health as much as a law and order issue. This is an example we must follow across the whole country.

Thirdly, there is mental ill health. I am shocked on visits to schools and colleges by the prevalence of mental illness among young people.

A few weeks ago, I was at a lovely infant and primary school in a comfortable, middle class part of my constituency. But the Head told me that over 10% of his pupils were coping with mental health problems. At the neighbouring secondary school, it was over 20%.

Lib Dems will always challenge the underfunding of mental health services – building on the

work we did together in Coalition, led by Norman Lamb.

Finally, education, where Layla Moran is taking the lead to argue for a world-class academic and vocational education system.

By contrast, this Government is taking education backwards with the scale of school and college cuts:

Head teachers asking for financial contributions from parents; schools closed down on Fridays to save money; the curriculum narrowed because of a lack of staff; neglect of Special Needs; and a general deterioration of morale.

There is no shortage of issues to campaign on. We have good ideas and clear messages. The challenge now is to translate our values and those messages into electoral success.

The next big test at the ballot box is the local elections in May. These aren't opinion polls but real elections.

And they matter enormously, not just because we want, and expect, to do well, but because local government reflects our belief in localisms and community politics.

If ever you feel pessimistic, the councils which we run, or lead coalitions: Bedford, Watford, Portsmouth, South Cambridge, South Somerset, Eastbourne, Eastleigh, Three Rivers – and indeed right here in York.

With 9,000 seats up for grabs these elections are a big challenge but a great opportunity.

An opportunity to get more Liberal Democrats elected, and to recruit more Liberal Democrat members and supporters across the country. I hope that all of you will channel your energy into these campaigns whether as a candidate or activist. If you don't have elections in your part of the UK, you can still get involved somewhere that does.

Success and persistence banishes the negativity we encounter in the media.

I became a parliamentary candidate for the seat I now hold at a time when we didn't register in the polls at all; but we then won the seat at the second attempt.

And what always lifts my spirits is to meet up with those who fought in previous campaigns and are still fighting today; like those who were here in York with me over four decades ago and are now running the city as Lib Dems.

Friends, we have every reason to be optimistic that our party can grow and make real progress.

And if, as I sense, the two old, tired and increasingly discredited major parties are to fracture, we shall move forward not in small steps, but in leaps and bounds.

There is everything to fight for. ■

