

Vince Cable

Valedictory Speech

Vince's valedictory speech at Bournemouth Conference 2019 (Autumn)



Thank you for your warm welcome.

It is one of our traditions that former leaders have a last hurrah at Conference before we leave the stage.

It gives me a chance to thank people who have helped me along what has sometimes been a rocky road and to answer those people who are asking me “what are you doing next”. On the precedent of previous leaders I should be expecting an offer to run Google or Amazon or perhaps an East European country.

But I haven't received an invite yet. And when I discovered that the oldest male contestant in this year's Strictly Come Dancing is about 40 years younger than me, I realised that that route probably doesn't offer much by way of career progression either. So I am making myself useful as our Health and Social Care spokesperson. Thanks to conference for deciding just now what I should say!

I have fought ten national elections over half a century. I couldn't have done that on my own without the emotional and practical support of my wife Rachel and my late wife Olympia, and without my dedicated team of volunteers in Twickenham and in Parliament led by Dee Doocey.

I also want to thank the foot soldiers.

When I was first elected in 1997 and last re-elected in 2017, I had the humbling experience of having hundreds of volunteers, from all over the country, including other candidates, campaign for me in that spirit of disciplined comradeship, which is the hall mark of our party. And that hard work, in 2010, took us into government. We no longer have to apologise for the past. I, for one, am proud to have spent five years of my life in government helping to sort out the mess which followed the financial crisis.

We made the right call to go into coalition nine years ago. We put country before party and suffered for it – in the short term.

We now see Labour and the Conservatives putting party before country and they will suffer for it – permanently.

In my two years as Leader, I was fortunate to have a parliamentary party which worked as a team and thought as a family.

And I was conscious in the leadership of standing on the shoulders of giants who preceded me.

This week in Westminster Abbey, we paid tribute to one of the biggest of them, Paddy Ashdown.

It would be great to be able to claim that I have led you from the wilderness to the Promised Land.

But the journey out of the wilderness started with my predecessor, Tim Farron, and I am confident will be completed by my successor, Jo Swinson.

Jo has hit the ground running and we have every reason to say to the world that she should be the next resident of Number 10.

I did, however, get us to the safety of an oasis, in the successful local and European elections and then onto some fertile high ground where we are consistently polling around 20% or more.

I realised that we were doing something right when I was at Malaga airport on the way to campaign in Gibraltar. I found myself, for the first time in my life, mobbed by a hen party, demanding endless selfies.

As one of them explained: 'You are absolutely AMAZING. My hero. A real celebrity. I always look out for you on the telly... reading the weather forecast'.

Crucial to our recovery was understanding the need to repair a badly damaged house from the foundations up by rebuilding the local government base – not, as some urged, by applying a coat of paint in the form of a new name or logo.

We are enormously indebted to the hardcore of activists who campaigned, and stood for us in local government, especially through the difficult years.

I vividly, and painfully, remember my ministerial visits around the country when I was bringing a meagre scrap of good news from the government while our troops on the ground were being wiped out.

They were "Lib Dems Working Here" but definitely weren't "Lib Dems Winning Here". But those who kept trying have been vindicated.

I want to thank those stalwarts who kept going and kept the party afloat.

I realised that our model of community campaigning still works when I visited Sunderland shortly after I became Leader, Brexit central and hitherto a Lib Dem 'black hole'.

I arrived to be surrounded by a gang of young people who seemed, frankly, rather intimidating.

I wasn't sure if they were Goths or Hells Angels. Anyway, they introduced themselves as the

local Liberal Democrats.

They had just won a council seat. They now have 8.

They are a just one example of the Liberal Democrat revival.

Our recovery has come from speaking with clarity and consistency on Europe.

We have been faithful to an internationalist, pro-Europe tradition which goes back, via all my predecessors, to Jo Grimond six decades ago.

70% of our members joined us to fight Brexit.

When I promised at the outset of my leadership to seek an Exit from Brexit, it was regarded as at the loopier end of political fantasy; it is now clearly understood even by the Government that the only real choice is No Deal versus No Brexit.

And there is no better deal than NO Brexit.

Brexit will make us poorer and risks breaking up our United Kingdom. We must stop it and we will.

I don't claim credit for the phrase "Bollocks to Brexit", but I was never persuaded by those who wanted to play safe or wanted us to campaign in the language of Jane Austen.

I am a fan of Jane Austen... but bollocks to that.

It is not a coincidence that we are winning again, both through a revival of local, community politics and by fighting Brexit. They are linked.

Brexit is a symptom of an underlying malaise about the way the country is run.

Liberal Democrats have long demanded fundamental reforms to the distribution of power: proportional voting, decentralisation, an elected second chamber.

We need no less than a democratic revolution.

The long Brexit battle has left us as the only major party unapologetically committed to Remain. And our clarity is hastening the decay of Labour and the Tories.

I owe much of my own political education to the arguments we had around the dinner table with my Conservative father. He contracted the pneumonia which killed him delivering leaflets in the snow for Mrs Thatcher.

The Conservative Party he believed in and fought for as an activist was certainly right wing but it was a broad church... not the intolerant, narrow, unrepresentative cult it has become today.

The Conservative Party of old is almost dead.

The new English National Party, which can't even embrace dyed-in-the-wool but decent traditional Tories like Philip Hammond and Nicholas Soames is driven by a particular narrative about English history.

For them, England is the country that saw off the Spanish Armada and Napoleon Bonaparte; which taught the troublesome Scots a lesson at Culloden; and got rid of most of Ireland and its problems.

For them, patriotism is rooted in nostalgia: for Dunkirk and the Blitz; for the days we ran Tanganyika and the Gold Coast; for bridge and bowls, played from Dorking to Darjeeling. It sees a new, optimistic, country becoming great again on the back of a revived British Empire. Nobody articulates this absurd fantasy better than Boris Johnson who likes to see himself as the reincarnation of Winston Churchill.

Churchill was, of course, a great wartime leader (as well as, in his time, a great liberal reformer). But he made terrible mistakes.

Johnson is learning not from the Churchill who prosecuted the Battle of Britain but from the Churchill of Gallipoli in the First World War when his impetuosity and ignorance, his underestimation of the opposition, combined to produce a costly disaster and humiliation: Brexit foreshadowed.

The redeeming feature of Johnson's leadership is that it may not last long. As a Classics scholar he will know of the – now forgotten – Emperor in the 1st Century AD, called Galba who assassinated his predecessor; ruled for a few months; made big promises to the Legions which he couldn't deliver; who then in turn assassinated him.

Tacitus observed of him: "Omnium consensus capax imperii, nisi imperasset." Roughly translated: everyone agreed that he was capable of ruling until he actually did it.

After the recent Johnson purges, these days we aren't worried about a transformation from Stalin to Mr Bean, but about Mr Bean trying to become Stalin.

For any half-decent Labour opposition, the self-destructive behaviour of the Tories would be a gift. I was – as most of you know – a Labour councillor and parliamentary candidate in my youth.

I retain great respect for many good, pro-European, social democrats I left behind like John Smith, who I worked for, and others in that tradition like Neil Kinnock, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown.

But they are now sidelined by the far left leadership of the modern Labour Party.

For three years Jeremy Corbyn and his allies have cynically sat on the fence on the biggest issue of our generation.

They believe that membership of the EU is just a side issue: a distraction from the class struggle; a capitalist project of no great interest.

A generation of young people in particular has been betrayed.

That, and the Labour Party's ugly intolerance and anti-semitism, have brought us the considerable talents of Chuka Umunna, Luciana Berger and Angela Smith to complement Sarah Wollaston, Philip Lee and Sam Gyimah from the other side of the aisle. Within the next few weeks and months I hope and expect that the trickle from both sides will become a flood.

Something big is happening here: the long awaited realignment of our politics in which people who are liberal and outward looking in their values, who see themselves as Liberals, Social Democrats, One Nation Conservatives or Greens are coming together in the same political family, with us at its heart.

That is a challenge as well as an opportunity for us. We have survived as a small furry mammal scurrying between the legs of ageing dinosaurs.

Now that the dinosaurs are headed for extinction we will need to adapt: to be a bigger,

welcoming, inclusive party.

That means managing and embracing disagreement and diversity.

We cannot have pious finger pointing: he said this; she voted for that.

We have got off to an excellent start with our six new recruits...

And in the liberal centre of British politics we must remain the party of open arms, not closed minds.

We will also have to win the public debate on issues people care about: not just Brexit.

I don't want to repeat the debate on health but there are some points I will be making when shadowing Matthew Hancock, a man who has progressed to a top job by agreeing passionately with the views of the Tory party leader, whoever it happens to be at the time.

First, we need to be honest about the need to raise taxes to spend more: an additional penny in the pound on income tax.

Labour is kidding us their promises will be paid for by someone else.

The few, not the many, will pay. The Tories, too, now believe in the magic money tree: more spending, less tax. Liberal Democrats are clear: the richer few should pay more but the many will also have to pay something extra.

That is what is meant by citizenship. We all have a stake. The second issue is mental health. LibDems in government – Norman Lamb and Paul Burstow – did a great job in pushing mental health up the agenda: insisting on firm targets for treatment.

The Tories have let mental health slip once again to the back of the queue.

There is a real crisis amongst children and young people. And you, conference, have just voted to give them the priority they need and deserve in our NHS.

The third issue I am determined to tackle is the poor working conditions in the NHS.

We need to cut the cant about Britain having the best health service in the world. We don't.

Retention rates for staff are dreadful. Workloads are often ridiculous. By comparison Mike Ashley and Sports Direct look like model employers.

There is something fundamentally wrong when thousands of idealistic, committed, professionals have to retire early or take refuge in the private sector.

Restoring the morale of its staff is a precondition for improving the NHS.

And, not least, we have to stop Boris Johnson in his role of Donald Trump's little helper, turning the NHS into a money making machine for US drug companies.

The NHS is just one part of British society in urgent need of a Liberal Democrat hand on the levers of power.

I published a pamphlet in March, before the last Brexit deadline, which asked you to imagine what we could do for the country if we could stop Brexit, and get beyond it.

I sought to tackle the big issues which are currently being ducked because too much time, money and energy is engaged in the Brexit debate:

- Building swathes of good quality social housing, quickly
- Bringing about a lifelong learning revolution
- Getting companies to think beyond short-term share price gains and executive greed

- Harnessing the power of big data while cracking down hard on predatory monopolies and tax dodgers

- And, crucially, meeting the climate emergency

These aren't new issues but they desperately need new solutions and fresh determination to deliver them in government.

The Liberal Democrats are in a unique position to lead.
Until recently we were high and dry on the rocks.

We fought our way back in the teeth of a gale and now we have the wind in our sails.
Jo is ready to steer us back into government as our new captain - and, now, I am full of confidence and hope for our party... and for our country. ■