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**Desert Island Risks:
Will Liberal Democrat policy
on Brexit leave them high and dry?**

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Introduction – a time to move on

There's a tremendous irony in the Liberal Democrats' claimed infatuation with the European Union and the federal agenda. Although rarely stated explicitly, the concept of having a European Super-state with substantial powers to overwhelm local decision-making at the level of national legislatures directly contradicts the fundamental values of liberalism and relativism, which have, until around 2006, underpinned the credo of the Liberal movement, and its successor, the Liberal Democrats.

In this analysis, we explore the historical context of the Liberal philosophy in regard to internationalism. We discover how, in a short period lasting no more than three years, a centuries-old ethos was swept away by expedience, leading to the devastation of the Liberal Democrat movement. A key part of this expedience led to a drift on European policy which ultimately prevented the party from being more than a cypher for pro-European Union sentiment, to such an extent that all other policy considerations seemed to have been subsumed into a dogged determination to prove that Britain would flounder in the aftermath of its departure from the Union.

We'll review the current condition and likely future evolution of the European agenda in terms of its impact on the Liberal Democrat movement, and ask: is there any prospect of recovery for the party, as long as it clings feverishly to an agenda founded on proving the Brexiteers wrong – and commits to doing so at the cost of commentary on almost everything else in the political agenda?

The conclusion we draw, from empirical evidence and the lessons of history, is that until the Liberal Democrats recognise the futility of fighting lost European battles, it will fail to impress an electorate which is more interested in the present and future than it is in the past.

We also offer a pathway to progress for the liberal movement in a post-Brexit world: one it will inevitably have to adopt in order to regain any semblance of relevance on the national and international stage. We suggest that, for very practical reasons, a positive decision should be taken to abandon this persistent addiction to obstruct the departure of the UK from the EU. Until it does, the Liberal Democrats will be unable to muster any significant uplift in their Parliamentary status or electoral appeal before citizens of a country where, however they voted, have manifestly demonstrated their lack of interest in gainsaying the outcome of the 2016 British referendum on European Membership.

This analysis offers a critique of possible scenarios, including the most likely one – namely a continuation of the current pro-European, pro-second referendum agenda, as well as a new path which accepts the realities of the situation and seek to re-invent the party in the context of the inescapable home-truths of the current political situation. It also assesses a compromise 'halfway house' option where the party continues to advocate the current hard-line pro-European policy

agenda, but at the same time opens a parallel policy agenda which is not dependent on a one-dimensional, pro-European platform.

Barring external events outside the control and predictive capability of commentators, it is virtually certain that the future direction is embodied in one of the three scenarios we're looking at. Only one of them offers any chance of significant recovery of the party's political position, so graphically squandered in the five years leading up to the debacle of May 2015 - a collapse based on a disastrous Europhile agenda far more significant than the eventual defeat of its accident-prone architect in 2017 – and which has stranded the Liberal Democrats on a political desert island from which only the party itself can secure its escape.

Liberalism: relativism writ large

There was a time when the Liberal agenda showed a tremendous consistency in its ethos. Its pioneers and leading lights demonstrated a laudable commitment to specific values, such as restoring the ownership of the land to the people, rather than its hoarding by a small elite was at the heart of it – to the extent that it underpins the words of the chorus to the Liberal anthem:

*“The land, the land
The ground on which we stand.
Why should we be beggars with a ballot in our hand?
God gave the land to the people.”¹*

This philosophy was predicated on the belief that the ‘common man’ was entitled to respect and parity of treatment versus the ‘landed gentry’. It was a notably philanthropic narrative, given that many of the foremost practitioners of the movement were themselves wealthy. At heart, nonetheless, the proposition was to empower the citizen rather than crush them under the yoke of poverty.

The same agenda underpinned the social perspective of Liberalism. There was a profound commitment to relativism. Indeed, a core tenet of liberalism, almost its very definition, was to oppose the authoritarian imposition of central norms on other people - and other countries.

It is this latter point which caused liberals to fight against forcing norms on people nationally or internationally. For liberalism, the idea was – to use a popular and oft-used quote by former Liberal Democrat Leader Charles Kennedy – ‘let a thousand flowers bloom.’ The inference was that this could only happen through ‘light touch’ regulation, and the avoidance of a wholesale enforcement of social norms through whatever means by the state, either within national boundaries or across them.

In the halcyon days of the Liberal Democrats, and certainly at its peak in Parliament, when it enjoyed a 63-strong presence on the Green Benches, the party became the ‘go-to’ destination for politically

¹ *The Land* (to the tune of *Marching Thro’ Georgia*).

interested citizens, including a large proportion of the younger electorate, who saw the Lib Dems as a breath of fresh air in a stifling, authoritarian and ultimately disappointing political environment.

It must be said that the pro-European stance of the Lib Dems was, even at that time, both evident and publicly acknowledged. Many in the party even made this their cause célèbre, and their relative strength in the European Parliament indicated that, if this pro-Europe stand wasn't actually motivating people to vote for them, it certainly wasn't putting them off.

However, the celebration of relativism carried with it an embedded contradiction – and one which would unravel the party in grand form across five years between 2010 and 2015, when Leader Nick Clegg's premiership of the party led to the most disastrous set of election results in the movement's history. It can be argued that one of the key failings was his incapacity to grasp the central importance of relativism to the party. This in turn led Mr Clegg to drive the party towards an ever more pro-European stance in a way which ultimately undermined the credibility of the entire movement. It also led to the uncovering of profoundly divergent philosophical strands which simply could not be made to co-exist. In effect, the current pro-European position was forged under Clegg, and continues to blight the party years later.

A position based on expedience rather than research or logic

To understand the difficulty of taking what to all intents and purposes amounts to an unquestioningly pro-European approach we need to recall the context of where 'it all began to go wrong.' On 5th February 2011, then British Prime Minister David Cameron choose to make a strategic statement of intent, poignantly deciding to address the public from a rostrum in Munich. His speech was a response to the perceived rise of Muslim extremism and his words were intended to court what he doubtless regarded as a convenient relationship with Clegg's Liberal Democrats:

“Frankly, we need a lot less of the passive tolerance of recent years and a much more active, muscular liberalism. A passively tolerant society says to its citizens, as long as you obey the law we will just leave you alone. It stands neutral between different values. But I believe a genuinely liberal country does much more; it believes in certain values and actively promotes them.”²

Cameron's definition of 'Muscular Liberalism' was a cunning redefinition of the latter label. Under his definition, it would be perfectly acceptable for Liberals to accept that the state can actively promote a value system, to the point of enforcing it through coercive means – such as denying a platform to non-violent extremists.

Muscular Liberalism appears to owe its roots to a related concept which was popularised as far back as the 1850s. This was 'muscular Christianity' – a phrase which, after limited use by various idealistic individuals, became much better known thanks to the work of an author called Charles Kingsley in 1857. Following a review of his writings by an approving clergyman, it became widely adopted.

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-speech-at-munich-security-conference>

In the book *Tom Brown at Oxford*, originally published in 1861, there is this passage:

“The least of the muscular Christians has hold of the old chivalrous and Christian belief, that a man’s body is given him to be trained and brought into subjection, and then used for the protection of the weak, the advancement of all righteous causes, and the subduing of the earth which God has given to the children of men.”³

What the Liberals were opposed to can be epitomised by the movement’s fierce rejection of what was described as the concept, derived from the Christian Bible, of linking physical exertion and muscularity with godliness.

Muscular Christianity had sufficient longevity to mature into an idea still in circulation in the early 20th century. In a volume called *Our Public Schools*, written by James George and Cotton Minchin in 1901, muscular Christianity is again described in stark but approving terms. They write:

“the spectacle of the Englishman going through the world with rifle in one hand and Bible in the other is laughable; but to Englishmen, who are neither idealists or logicians, it is not. We wish to see his skill with the one and his faith in the other strengthened and increased. If asked what our muscular Christianity has done, we point to the British Empire.”⁴

However, while traditionally such an absolutist position would have been profoundly objectionable to Liberals, an insidious change was occurring in 2011, when the concept of ‘muscular liberalism’ was embraced by Nick Clegg, and this has important implications to the current Liberal Democrat position towards the European Union.

Under Nick Clegg, far from being rejected, the concept of muscular liberalism was applauded. He even said so in a speech On Thursday 3 March 2011, Clegg made his own muscular speech in, giving unalloyed backing to Cameron’s redefined liberalism:

“That is why I thought the PM’s argument in favour of ‘muscular liberalism’ was absolutely right. Liberalism is not a passive, inert approach to politics. It requires engagement, assertion. Muscular liberals flex their muscles in open argument. There is nothing relativist about liberalism.”⁵

Clegg’s overt abandonment of relativism was directly in contradiction to the centuries old commitment to exactly that principle by the founding fathers of the movement Clegg led for seven years. His team seemed to be backing up the same interventionist policies. For example, Chris Huhne, briefly a technical ally and then a foe of Clegg, stated this very clearly in *The Orange Book* of 2004. Sharing his belief in the need for the United Nations to take a more assertive role, even when misdeeds are confined to national borders, he wrote:

³ Thomas, Hughes, *Tom Brown at Oxford* (Ticknor and Fields, 1861), chapter 11.

⁴ James George Cotton Minchin, *Our Public Schools*, page 113 (Sonnenschein, 1901).

⁵ https://www.libdems.org.uk/nick_clegg_speech_an_open_confident_society

“it has to change its approach to domestic sovereignty, which is set out in Article 2, paragraph 7 of the Charter forbidding intervention in the internal affairs of its members. UN members must have the collective capacity to challenge the sovereignty of other members for gross and persistent abuse of human rights, the denial of the right to peaceful coexistence of nations and communities, or willful and widespread environmental damage.”

Thus, Chris Huhne, one of the leading Liberal Democrats at the time, not only endorsed intervention by an external supranational body in the affairs of other countries: he actually supported such action on the basis that being a bad environmental neighbour justified external intervention.

It becomes easy to understand why the Liberal Democrats of 2015, and indeed before then, became so obsessively supportive of the European project. Gone was the caution surrounding global intervention. Relativism was nowhere to be seen. In its place was a new acceptance that there were grounds for interfering with state actions in the interests of the collective interest. And that collective interest could be the environment, or preventing extremism.

But we should also note the significance of Cameron’s choice of location. He didn’t make his speech on English soil. He went to Germany and thus implied that these interventions were indeed justifiable on a trans-national scale. Whatever he had in store for Conservative policy is secondary to the fact that Nick Clegg agreed with this stunning redefinition of liberalism. From this point on, as long as Clegg was in charge, the European project was no longer going to be opposed on the basis of undue state super-state-intervention. If it was good for the environment, let just one flower bloom – an EU approved flower with strict limits on its use of oxygen and generation of carbon dioxide.

Such a willingness to intervene in the sovereignty of nation states, even for ecological rather than human rights reasons, creates a precedent which has far reaching implications for the Liberal movement as a whole. However perverse it is for Liberals to support such a level of intervention, it would be inconsistent for the same people to resist intervention at a European level on either social policy or environmental policy.

By setting the intervention bar as such a low level, the obvious logic is that the European Union has the right to intervene on domestic British policy to reduce the presumed environmental harm of the country’s activities on the wider world. As a result, the party leadership could only express emphatic support for the sorts of policies which are now blighting the country’s ability to challenge potentially ludicrous claims made regarding what needs to be regulated and what does not.

Indeed, using the example of the environment, the country has signed international targets for reducing air pollution which it has then exceeded. Regardless of legitimate questions which have been raised about the targets themselves, such as the fact that reducing certain emissions increases others, the UK has to pay real fines amounting to significant sums of money as a result of the rigid commitments it has made. In fairness, these targets appear to bind the country regardless of whether or not we leave the EU. Crucially for our analysis, after extensive investigation, we found it

impossible to find any official objection by to such internationally imposed measures. This indicates that there is no principle objection to such measures in the party, a further reflection of the comfort which the party seems to find in its new-found acceptance of non-relativistic policy formation.

It might be said that the ecological future of the planet is such an all-pervading consideration that special rules apply. So let's take a classic example of where the position taken in support of intervention has become a bigger factor than the rationale to justify this. The emissions debate has been totally mired in assumptions rather than data. A detailed inspection of the claims and the information behind them shows there really is little plausible evidence to back up what has been said to justify the punitive international restrictions currently being imposed. Yet to suggest this in the party is seen as tantamount to a treasonable offence. 'Climate change denial' is not an observation in the party, but an accusation and even an insult. The tolerance of different views is now heavily restricted in a number of areas, adding succor to those who say that it really is alright to accept international restrictions in the common interest.

Elections and all that

And so the Lib Dems would enter the 2015 General election with a European flag in one hand and a pro-EU leaflet in the other. Their proud boast would be that they were the one party committed to a truly pan-European agenda for the UK. There were other policies too, and it was clear that the party wanted to present itself as a multi-faceted electoral proposition.

Yet in the run up to 2015, there was plenty of evidence to suggest this was a flawed strategy. All the indications were that the one thing which was making no difference to the party's fortunes was its massive emphasis on European membership of the United Kingdom to the cost of other campaigning.

There had already been stark warnings at the ballot box of what loomed for the party if they didn't deal with the real issues in respect of how it was being perceived. Centrally, there was evidence that the pro-European agenda was not going them any good at all.

On 28th February, 2013 a by-election was held in the constituency of Eastleigh, following the forced resignation of sitting Liberal Democrat MP Chris Huhne. He stood down after various issues arose which ultimately led to the imprisonment of Mr Huhne and his wife. Following a fractious and heated by-election campaign to elect his successor, the campaign gravitated in large part towards European issues. At the count, the Liberal Democrat candidate, Mike Thornton, limped back in with a majority of just 1,771, down from the previous majority of 3,864 in 2010.

While it was a victory for the Lib Dems at a challenging time, the internal swings of votes told their own story. In 2010 at the general Election, the second placed candidate had been a Conservative. In 2013 in the by-election it was Diane James. She represented the UK Independence Party. UKIP had

gained over 24% points in the polls. The Conservatives had declined by 13.9%. But the Lib Dems had declined by 14.4% - more than any other party in the election.

It's always possible to generate exotic explanations to justify why, for example, there was no swing from the Lib Dems to UKIP. But such claims are simply not credible. Roughly speaking, the number of Conservative and Lib Dem votes went down by about 50% a piece, while the UKIP vote went up by about 500%. The turnout was down but no common sense analysis would ignore the swing and conclude there had been a direct shift from Lib Dem to UKIP. It is obvious that electors had left both the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives to back UKIP. This would indicate that a kind of self-affirming assumption that some kind of 'firewall' existed between UKIP and the Lib Dems at the polls simply didn't exist.

A further clue – one which even caused public questions about Nick Clegg's strategy and leadership – occurred in June 2014. The UK European Elections provided a perfect opportunity for the public to 'send a signal' to the Government by voting in pro-European Lib Dem MEPs in vast numbers. Instead, what happened was the opposite. The party's vote halved to under 7%, and due to dynamics of the electoral arrangement which operates according to a system of proportionality, the Liberal Democrats sank below a crucial threshold of support. This led to the collapse of the Liberal Democrats' 11 seats to a mere single seat in the South East of England. Even this one was secured only on the basis that the 'list' of candidates to be elected there was longer than in other parts of the country. Without that lucky lifeline, the party would have ended up with no seats at all.

By contrast, UKIP soared and won the evening with a gain of 11 seats, bolstering their tally to a total of 24 MEPs. Conservatives declined by six seats, but more interestingly the gain by Labour of seven seats again suggests that if anyone was voting on a pro-European agenda basis, they may have seen the Labour Party as more credible than the Liberal Democrats.

Whatever the theological discussions one may have about the internal shift of votes, the undeniable reality is the failure of the Lib Dems to generate any traction for their pro-European agenda. Despite this persistent evidence of danger from local elections, by-elections and the European elections, the party refused to accept the writing on the wall. The leadership appears to have continued to fool itself into believing that, somehow, a disproportionate emphasis on pro-European policies would win the day.

And so the General Election of 2015 would unfold as a test case for the Lib Dem agenda - and also of Nick Clegg's leadership – including his intensely pro-European position.

The night of the election was expected to be difficult for the party. Nobody believed that Nick Clegg, still clinging on to leadership despite persistently dreadful poll ratings, would fulfil his self-proclaimed target of doubling the number of Lib Dem MPs to over 120. But few expected the catastrophe which ensued either.

Few results tell as unarguable a story of opposites as the 2015 General Election. The outcome of this election was unambiguous in two senses. Firstly, it delivered a surprise overall majority for David Cameron's Conservatives. He won on the promise of the referendum on the continued EU membership of the UK. At the other end of the scale, the night had been catastrophic for the Lib Dems. The party was reduced from 57 MPs to a mere eight.

At least one critic of Nick Clegg admitted he had lost a substantial sum of money in political betting, having *underestimated* the likely decline of the Lib Dem Parliamentary party: "Nick has finally found something he excels at – losing." Within hours of the result, Clegg resigned from the leadership, his position having become self-evidently untenable, not least because he had ignored repeated warnings that he *would* preside over a disaster if he insisted on leading the party into the 2015 election.

Was the cause of his, and the party's, downfall a fanatical endorsement of Britain in Europe? No. He lost due to a combination of other factors including his performance as Deputy Prime Minister in Government, coupled to his inability to define the party according to recognized liberal values plus his dramatic U-turn on student tuition fees in 2010; a decision his inner sanctum were already preparing for at the very same time that the party in 2010 had been vociferously opposing tuition fees in electioneering.

So the European agenda did not sink the party. *But what matters here is that the Lib Dem pro-European stance did nothing at all to save the party either.* The public had the chance to vote for a Europhile movement and decided against it – or at the least that this was not reason enough to cast their votes in that direction. If ever there was a salutary warning *not* to pin the Liberal Democrats' narrative on European membership, this was it.

There's nothing illegitimate in holding pro-European views. Rather, the error was to promote the very definition of the party on these lines; and ignore the far more pressing problems facing the movement's credibility in the public's eyes.

But the damage was done. On the morning of 8th May, 2015, Conservatives celebrated their surprise overall majority. This was one of the most impressive outcomes for the Conservatives in British political history. Meanwhile, the Lib Dems ended up with few enough MPs to be able to get about in a substantial people carrier or, should they wish to make foreign trips together, a large rowing boat.

Those who ignore the lessons of history...

With Clegg gone, a lengthy but predictable leadership election led to the promotion of one of the eight remaining MPs, Tim Farron, to the leadership. Tim had been a fabulously popular party President. He was seen as a man who'd risen up from the 'grass roots.'

Unlike Clegg, who had inherited a safe seat from Lib Dem Richard Allen, and who was seen to have treated the idea of delivering leaflets and serving as a local Councillor as something he'd successfully managed to avoid, Farron had taken the long way up, securing his Parliamentary seat of Westmorland and Lonsdale in a famous gain from the Conservatives. His election was thus treated by the rank and file as the end of a dark time for the Lib Dems. Here was a good old Liberal, back at the helm. For the rest of the party grass roots there were reasons to be cheerful.

Yet all was not well with the party. Despite the contradictions between the historical Liberal Democrat faithfulness to relativism, it became apparent that the Clegg regime had generated sufficient momentum for this authoritarian position to carry this way of thinking into the 2017 General Election.

Following on from this, another key relic from the previous regime was the continuing obsession with pro-EU policy. The manifesto presented to the British electorate proudly boasted three key pro-EU pillars:

'Every vote for the Liberal Democrats is a vote to give the final say to the British people in a referendum on whether to accept the deal or remain in the EU.'

'Keep the UK in the single market and customs union - trade must continue without damaging customs controls at the border.'

'Protect the rights of EU and UK citizens living abroad - ending the uncertainty for millions of people.'

The three pillars were very clear and unambiguous. However, let's look at the implications of each one. What if the Lib Dems *had* found themselves in a position to actually deliver any of all of this bold-pro EU agenda?

'Every vote for the Liberal Democrats is a vote to give the final say to the British people in a referendum on whether to accept the deal or remain in the EU'

This is a very clear commitment: give the British people a vote on the final deal. The argument was not unique to the Lib Dems. Others shared their enthusiasm for having a rerun of the original referendum.

The rationale goes like this. The country voted in favour of the principle of withdrawing from the European Union. However, the country has not seen the specific arrangements which are being set out as the post-Brexit deal. Since this is a very important decision, only the British people are in a position to approve such a momentous constitutional change to the UK's status within the context of the EU. To quote the Liberal Democrat manifesto again:

'We acknowledge the result of the 2016 referendum, which gave the government a mandate to start negotiations to leave – but we believe the final decision should be made by the British people, not by politicians.'

On the face of it, this proposal appears to have some legitimacy. After all, there has been a repeated mantra which claims the British people didn't know what Brexit would actually look like, and were therefore voting in ignorance of the final implementation plans. In this sense, it would appear reasonable to give the electorate the right to veto a deal which, in the final analysis, is not delivering in practice what the people believed they were voting for in theory.

However, the devil is in the detail. The final package would never be a three-paragraph summary covering the customs union, UK citizens' rights abroad and a few words about freedom of movement. Far from it. The real document will be a monumentally detailed and technical set of terms which will cover everything from the interrelation between safety standards and UK exports through to the actual arrangements in tax and tariff terms for every single aspect of trade, from apples to zoological specimens. The idea that a referendum could be held on such an extensive set of proposals is like asking the British public to vote on the operator's manual for the National Grid.

Could campaigners simplify the content sufficiently to create a digestible debate for the public? No. What would happen in such a debate is evident from previous examples. In the original referendum on Brexit in June 2016, the public voted by 52% to 48% in favour of departing from the EU.

Yet the very same groups, including the Liberal Democrats, claimed that the public did not have a clear understanding of what they were voting about. If they didn't understand it then, what will make them understand it in the next referendum? The Liberal Democrats have not explicitly answered this question, in fairness mainly because almost no-one has asked it. But it's a central issue in the Liberal Democrat proposition. After all, the original referendum asked a simple, yes or no question about whether in principle the UK should remain in the EU.

This second referendum requires citizens to be clued up on everything from fishing rights through to the implications of Brexit for imperial measurements such as the ounce or a pint of beer. The citizen must be able to grasp all these aspects and then make an informed judgement on all of this. And then this leads directly to the next issue: what there will then be the detractors who say that, once again, the public didn't know what it was voting for. This could result in a never-ending call for another referendum by the losers, in rather the same way a gambler hopes to win their money back by placing another bet. That's not a realistic way to run a democracy.

It also ignores the fact that everyone entered the 2016 referendum upon the understanding that this was a once-and-for-all vote. Only afterwards, and briefly on the close of polls and before the votes had been counted when UKIP Leader Nigel Farage mistakenly thought he'd lost, did anyone call for a rematch.

Let's turn now to the second pillar;

'Keep the UK in the single market and customs union - trade must continue without damaging customs controls at the border.'

This is a perfectly legitimate commitment for a party to make in an election. Of course, it largely undermines a core aspect of leaving the EU on the first place. Remaining in the Single Market with all the regulatory implications this has is in direct contradiction to what many who voted to leave the want. There is nothing unprincipled in a Liberal Democrat manifesto which promises to maintain the status quo, and it provided further evidence of the religious fervor with which the party wanted to be seen to be opposing the UK's exit from the EU, even if the outcome of the election would suggest it wasn't wholly persuasive.

And here is that third pillar again;

'Protect the rights of EU and UK citizens living abroad - ending the uncertainty for millions of people.'

This well-meaning policy commitment could be included in the manifesto of every mainstream party standing in the UK General Election of 2017. The intention here was to suggest that other parties would create problems for EU and UK citizens living abroad. It's not clear why the UK Lib Dems would be standing on a manifesto commitment of protecting the rights of EU citizens who aren't also UK citizens, but that's something of a moot point. What is not a moot point is the emptiness of the policy as a whole. A good test of whether a statement is credible is to see if the opposite statement also has credibility. The opposite of the Lib Dem policy commitment is:

'Harm the rights of EU and UK citizens living abroad – sustaining the uncertainty for millions of people.'

We suggest that this is somewhat meaningless as no party would ever make such a preposterous policy statement. What we see here, therefore, is a further effort by the Lib Dems to make the UK's departure from the European Union the centerpiece of their 2017 election campaign.

There were other promises, all fashioned around the need to stay in the EU;

- *'**Defending social rights and equalities:** Many important protections such as the right to 52 weeks' maternity leave and rights to annual leave are currently based on EU law, and many of these rights have been upheld at the European Court of Justice. Liberal Democrats will fight to ensure that these entitlements are not undermined.'*
- *'**Maintaining environmental standards:** The European Union has created the highest environmental standards in the world. We have a duty to future generations to protect our environment and tackle climate change. Liberal Democrats will ensure that everything is done to maintain those high standards in UK law, including the closest possible cooperation on climate and energy policy.'*

- *'Law enforcement and judicial co-operation: Europol, the European Arrest Warrant and shared access to police databases have helped make Britain's streets safer. We will fight to maintain maximum co-operation to ensure criminals are pursued quickly and effectively and police are not frustrated by huge amounts of red tape.'*

It became apparent that the Lib Dem policy position was that the very lifeblood of the UK's future would be sucked out by the country's departure from the EU. Given that the country was still functioning and its economy still maintaining an even keel – to an extent even benefitting from the devaluation of the Pound which occurred after the referendum result – the doom-mongering predictions seemed at best questionable and at worst wrong.

The result of the 2017 General Election tells its own story. The Lib Dems went up from eight to 12 seats. However, within this there was a sorry tale of loss. Of the nine seats the party held prior to the poll (which included Sarah Olney, who won a by-election victory in London's Richmond Park, held following the resignation of a Conservative MP over a local issue), they lost five. The contraction was only concealed by the gaining of eight other seats, all in constituencies held by the Lib Dems in the recent past, leading to the net growth to 12.

Again, the intensely pro-European referendum seems to have been all but irrelevant to the electoral fortunes of the party. A number of the gains were against defending MPs who also supported EU membership. Whatever the moral and principled reasons for making so much of EU membership, the referendum the party had been calling for seemed somewhat precarious as a proposition, given that the party's overall poll rating had gone down, not up, to below 8%. 92% of the electorate decided another referendum on the European question was insufficient grounds to vote Lib Dem.

And what of the arch-Europhile, the Leader who did so much to make Europe the diamond in the crown of Lib Dem policies? Nick Clegg lost his seat, and slipped out of the political spotlight to make occasional pro-European statements, while continuing to ignore the reality: that he, as the leading proponent of a Remain position and of a referendum of some sort to give the British people another chance at considering Brexit, had failed to convince his own constituents that this mattered enough to re-elect him.

Referendum – really?

At least we can be confident that the Liberal Democrats have always been consistent about the referendum itself. Or can we? How credible was the Lib Dem call for a second referendum? On deeper analysis, it's a position loaded with contradictions. Given the apparently unshakable commitment to such a policy, a look behind the curtain, so to speak, reveals a very different story.

When you look at the actual behavior of the Lib Dems in recent years over a referendum, the position has altered beyond all recognition across the last decade from being fervently in support of a referendum, to imposing a whip on MPs under Nick Clegg to oppose a referendum - to calling for a referendum again.

Note also the sort of commentary the current leader, Vince Cable, made on the issue some years ago. His position utterly contradicted the vision of Nick Clegg on the nature of progress in the European Union, a conflict starkly highlighted in a prophetic warning to the party published in 2012 called *The Alternative View*. In this book, the authors warned:

“In the absence of a common philosophical guiding ethos, Lib Dem Ministers were in danger of looking as if they were agreeing or opposing action points with their ministerial Tory counterparts on the basis of a proposal’s individual merit, rather than strategically consistent factors relevant to liberalism.”⁶

This inconsistency was extremely apparent in terms of the wavering monologues which represented the thinking of those who would shortly take over the party under Mr Clegg. In fact, there are many anomalies in the two volumes of *The Orange Book* project. Clegg bemoaned the dangers of revolutionary change in the European Union. Writing about the EU he states:

“Principle 1: Stop perpetual revolution.... it should be obvious that a process of relentless institutional revolution within the EU is guaranteed to inflame passions within.”

66 pages later in the very same book, Vince Cable observes:

“Mao Zedong may have been a tyrant, but his concept of ‘permanent revolution’ contained the crucial insight that state bureaucracies will always ossify and become self-serving without mechanisms to force self-criticism. In our gentler political climate radical, if less extreme, remedies are required both at a national and EU level.”

The contradiction needs no emphasis by us.

It’s not the only example of inconsistency from Nick Clegg on the issue. On 5th March 2008 Nick Clegg, at that time the Liberal Democrat leader, had insisted the party's MPs abstain from the vote. MPs rejected proposals to hold a UK-wide referendum on whether to ratify the EU's Lisbon Treaty.

But minutes before the key vote, Scotland and Northern Ireland spokesman Mr Carmichael announced he had offered to quit ahead of defying the official party position. In the end, 14 Liberal Democrat MPs defied Mr Clegg in support of a referendum, and Mr Farron and Mr Heath joined Mr Carmichael in resigning their front bench posts. Remember that one of these, Tim Farron, went on to be the leader of the party from 2015-2017.

Meanwhile, the man who would succeed Farron as leader of the party, Vince Cable, has had oscillating views himself. The *Daily Mail* reported that he:

warned that plans to hold a second vote were 'seriously disrespectful and utterly counterproductive' and urged the party to focus on the specifics of the upcoming Brexit negotiations.

⁶ To be contrasted with the views expressed in *The Orange Book*, pp136-140

He said the party, which has been the most consistent in its support for the EU, should consider what concessions it is willing to make on fundamental Brexit topics such as the freedom of movement.

The former business secretary warned the party could find itself fighting a second referendum on the same side as UKIP if Mrs May put forward a soft Brexit option.

Mr Cable, speaking at the Lib Dem party conference in Brighton, told the Press Association: 'The second referendum raises a lot of fundamental problems.

'What happens if you win? Is that binding? Do you have to do a third?

'Which side would we be on if there was a soft Brexit, would we support Theresa May or would we be with Nigel Farage voting it down?

'I don't think the second referendum is a panacea to anything.' Mr Cable added: 'I don't think it should be the issue we're leading on.'

'I'm not criticising [Mr Farron], I would just like to see more emphasis on what it is we want from these negotiations rather than arguing about the tactics and the means.

We must accept the public have voted on the matter.

*We have to negotiate and we have to set out what are the things we should make some concessions on, and freedom of movement is one, and what are things we're fighting for.'*⁷

So, it seems even the position on a referendum has been a 'movable feast' with Clegg performing the most extraordinary U-turns on whether a referendum was in line with policy or not. Faced with this sort of confusion on what for the public was already a relatively obscure issue and we see why there was no prospect of this position working: essentially, Clegg and others took the Lib Dems into a policy area the public found confusing and then contradicted themselves. You don't have to be political commentator to understand that the Liberal Democrats' approach to the question of European referendums has not been the party's finest hour.

⁷ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3796525/Even-Lib-Dems-split-EU-Vince-Cable-urges-party-ditch-second-referendum-pledge-Clegg-continues-Project-Fear-accuses-Tories-stuck-Brexit-creek.html>

Eurovision?

Where does this leave the Liberal Democrats in the context of the current Brexit agenda? There are three considerations here: the principles involved, the practical political campaigning, and thirdly the likely impact on their fortunes as a movement. Let's take each in turn.

Principles

As we have seen, the Lib Dems have drifted into an inconsistent position, thanks to the incoherent leadership of the former Leader, Nick Clegg, and his inability to synthesise a consistent message – as far as the traditional values of liberalism and thus relativism are concerned – on the European question. His confused commentary on free speech and his senior team's explicit advocacy for overruling national sovereignty in the interests of, for example, presumed environmental benefits, means that the party has abandoned its historic principle of relativism.

A new absolutist agenda was embraced through the publication of *The Orange Book*. Despite utterly contradictory statements within that work, the ascendant caucus from within it was consistently authoritarian and, apparently, comfortable with the idea of ceding power to the European super-state, regardless of the consequences to the principle of national sovereignty.

Vince Cable, who assumed the role of leader in 2017, was a key member of *The Orange Book* collective. He was also instrumental in defining the group's positions and, given the fact that he was also a member of the Clegg administration, the acceptance of the power of a supranational institution such as the European Union to intervene in state matters is highly unlikely to be challenged. While he may have had a more radical 'Maoist' perspective in the past, leadership often has a moderating – or conforming – influence and this seems to have been the case on Mr Cable.

At a philosophical level, therefore, the party is going to continue to welcome the imposition of multi-state solutions, which essentially sweep away the previously sacred celebration, by liberals of the past, of individualism and relativistic policy making.

Within this, current Liberal Democrats have continuously argued in favour of the EU as a bloc for economic reasons. They claim that the United Kingdom will falter economically outside the EU, and have consistently warned of economic disaster for an independent UK trading unit.

This prognosis by the party is a guess. Nobody really knows if this is true or not and, as such, an objective assessment of this heady claim must be that it is simply a way of trying to bolster a prejudice in favour of being in the bloc. Why would there be such a prejudice? In fact, it is based on an assumption that together Europe is stronger than when divided. This assumption has been allowed to drift into an assumed 'truth' that the best way to do everything is with ever-stronger ties of a statutory and economically binding nature. The fact that the entire project is driven largely by economic considerations plus a philosophical ideology which is firmly rooted in certain specific economic paradigms based on free trade and a single market, regardless of the pain this causes the

less wealthy nations in the short term, and quite possibly the more wealthy nations in the longer term, seems to be forgotten.

Practical political campaigning

When challenged to explain why the Liberal Democrats were taking such a singularly fundamentalist pro-EU line in the 2017 General Election, there was an official response which simply said one party had to stand up against the inadvisable Brexit agenda. However, privately, there was an honest admission that this was also about finding a differentiation versus other parties. On the face of it, there was a strong case for the Lib Dems to try to sweep up the 48% of voters who opposed Brexit. As one senior member of the Tim Farron administration commented, “when you’re starting at 8%, you have to do what it takes to get more votes and this looked like an open goal for the party to aim for.”

Another former Lib Dem MP who blames his election defeat on ‘Captain Clegg’s utterly rudderless leadership’ added sardonically, “the party’s been trying to triangulate its position on the EU – to be the third point in the triangle against Labour and the Cons. The problem is that the triangle they’re trying to be a part of doesn’t exist. It’s really a single line for or against – with the Cons at one end, promising a hard Brexit and Labour at the other end also promising a Brexit but being vague about what it looks like. Nobody’s offering ‘no Brexit’ because it’s not an option and everybody knows it. So to take a ‘Remainer’ line now isn’t like standing in a strategic position on the pitch – it’s like standing outside the stadium.” His views have been echoed by others who conflate the poor performance of Nick Clegg as leader with his equally poor attempt at creating any kind of motivating agenda around a pro-European position. Put simply, it didn’t work and because of how he expressed it, nobody cared about it as much as they cared about other matters. A London Liberal Democrat activist commented: “[Nick] was like a mechanic working on a car and going on about promising to get the tyre pressures right when actually everyone else could see the battery’s flat.”

In fairness, it may have been possible to generate a more compelling pro-EU story. However, the Clegg administration was so mired in criticism and ridicule that possibly no story, not even a persuasive one, could have been made audible above the din of anger and contempt which had built up towards Clegg and his party by 2015, and which apparently had yet to dissipate two years later in the ‘Brexit’ General Election. Note that Prime Minister Theresa May who ill-advisedly called the General Election, defined it as a poll to give her a strong mandate in the Brexit negotiations. As such, there was a golden opportunity for the Liberal Democrats to ‘redraw the line.’

The fact they failed to do so, even in the light of a hugely unsuccessful result for the Prime Minister and her party, suggests that there is no true mileage which can meaningfully be exploited – or at least there wasn’t in June 2017.

Conventional wisdom would suggest that such issues do move on in the public consciousness, and if there was no traction to be found in 2017, there won’t be any more in subsequent years. If this analysis is correct, from a purely electoral point of view, the continued focus – or even obsession –

with the EU membership question as the flagship Lib Dem policy is unlikely to yield significant polling benefits for the movement.

Even if there is an exceptionally poor turn of events in the EU as a whole, the main beneficiaries are likely to be those who manage the news in the context of Brexit rather than in the context of a Remain position. After all, the worse the EU looks, the more attractive Brexit would appear to be. By contrast, any difficulties faced by the UK as a result of the Brexit debate do not appear to translate into a groundswell of support to those who opposed the departure of the UK from the European Union. Once again, it's worth remembering that the Liberal Democrats actually managed to reduce their share of the polls from 8% in 2015 to 7% in 2017, which suggests that, at the very least, a 'Remain' position is not important enough to overwhelm the many negatives which have arisen in the reputation of the party across the last 10 years.

One further point: the Lib Dems have apparently decided to resolutely reject any prospect of benefit to the UK from better trading associations with non-EU countries. Such unequivocal refusal to see ANY benefits to the new potential arrangements undermines the overall credibility of the party's contribution to the debate. Few decisions carry zero merit with them. The fact that the Lib Dems are determined to portray leaving as an entirely negative proposition tends to make their overall EU stance appear somewhat facile in a manner which serves to 'write them out of the script' of serious discourse about the future of the UK in terms of the EU and the rest of the world's countries and trading blocs. After all, what's the point in discussing the matter with a group which has absolutely nothing constructive to offer in a debate which necessarily *has* to make the best of Brexit? And why vote for a party which thinks the game's up for the country after Brexit? The public don't tend to vote for the politics of defeatism.

It could be that there is still a genuine romantic attachment to the hope that the UK won't leave the EU in the end. Politics is not about romance but about hard-headed decisions and intelligent campaigning positions. As such, nostalgic associations with the past are not sufficient grounds to expect a potent political influence in the future. It might be harder for the party to move on rather than clinging to a position they feel SHOULD have worked. But it didn't and it may be time for the strategists to consider accepting the elements of the grieving process, using this approach to move on to more fruitful campaigning positions on Europe and the many other issues which continuously arise in the British political environment.

Likely impact on the fortunes of the Liberal Democrats

The return to the party an overtly uncompromising pro-European line is beyond doubt. There appears no prospect of any deviation from this position and it is also clear that there is no appetite amongst the Parliamentary party to challenge this strategy.

It's a gamble – a political 'junk bond' in that its value can go down as well as up. The decline in the party's support in 2017, at a General Election explicitly contrived on the proposition of strengthening the Government's hand in Brexit negotiations, makes it obvious that no such uplift has occurred. It is

exceedingly improbable that any such uplift will occur in the future. In that sense, it is fair to say that this political gamble has failed before it's even run its course.

Even if the Liberal Democrats were proved right and there were a significant decline in the economic prosperity of the United Kingdom, the party would not gain anything from this because it cannot be considered to have anything to offer in a post-Brexit environment. Having steadfastly refused to entertain any post-Brexit scenarios, preferring instead to fixate on the possibility of a second referendum, no investment has been made in seeking to secure its relevance in the practical context of a country withdrawing from the EU. Ironically, the better the country does, the less credible the Lib Dem position looks, while the worse the country does the more it needs a formula to cope with that decline in fortunes, which does not include the prospect of a re-entry to the European Union – an option which is as undemocratic as it is unpalatable to the voting majority. As such, and to quote a former Liberal Democrat MP, “the party has painted itself into a corner in a room which no-one even goes into any more.”

A thought experiment

As a thought experiment, what might the Liberal Democrats do in order to secure a recovery in the polls? In the best-case scenario, it would identify a niche which is currently unoccupied by any other political grouping and stimulate the public to be sufficiently attracted to the ideas contained within that positioning to vote for it, even if there is no realistic prospect of those votes leading to electoral success. In a sense, the Lib Dems need to become a statement of opinion, and one in which they can reign supreme.

What might such a positioning look like? As we have already discussed it can have nothing to do with any prospect of remaining within the EU. It's a 'non-starter' because that debate has been completed as far as the public is concerned. There is no realistic prospect of reopening the debate because it is meaningless to pretend that a decision has NOT been made – and utterly pedantic to infer that a referendum on the finished deal is anything more than a rerun of the original one.

Therefore, the party would need to realign itself on some other aspect of policy. This leads to a further irony. If the Lib Dems chose to return to their philosophical routes, this would require the active promotion of both individualism for the citizen and relativism for the state in relation to other states. It has been argued, with some justification, that both these values have been compromised by the aggressive imposition of norms which extend far beyond what would be the minimum necessary for a peaceful Europe which trades effectively as a single market.

For example, the demand that imperial measures be abandoned in favour of a metric system had nothing to do with the welfare of any citizen. It was, rather, the wilful extinguishing of a cultural variation in favour of a pan-European norm. Another example is the requirement for all European passports to be similar in external appearance – an imposition which has been explicitly commented upon by Brexiteers. There was no practical reason for this – as long as the contents of the passport included the necessary information in the correct format, the need for external visual conformity is

entirely surplus to any practical requirement. Yet this, too, was introduced across the UK, giving traditionalists another reason to object to the direction being taken by the European Union.

Similar objections can be raised to other determinations, such as stringent new vehicle test requirements which are effectively ignored in the least complicit states, but which put an additional burden on the more complicit ones, with no discernible safety benefit. An audacious scheme to limit the maximum engine power of motorcycles but to not do the same for cars angered millions of riders. New rules about car tests, which seemed overbearing, angered an even wider community of road users. Another European ruling, known as the 'Vnuk' case, had the capacity to essentially close down all motor sport due to the consequences of the ruling, which relates to vehicle insurance and liability on motorcar and motorcycle racing.

For the Liberal Democrats to return to their philosophical core values would require the rejection of these fatuous restrictions on civil liberties. However, the party seems either unwilling to accept these inevitable consequences of remaining consistent or, perhaps more probably, simply hasn't been able to grasp them. In either scenario, it is patently obvious that the party's unquestioning loyalty to the European project contradicts its fundamental presumed belief in personal liberty and international cultural relativism.

The party could still continue to support the principle of the European Union, but it would have to do so on the basis of campaigning for a less authoritarian and intrusive political approach to unity. Since there is no serious dialogue about reform within the Lib Dems when it comes to the EU, only a constant series of attacks against the Brexit agenda, it seems that such a finessed agenda has no realistic chance of being adopted in the short to medium term.

Back to the real world

As we have seen, the observable, circumstantial evidence would suggest that there is little or nothing to be gained for the Lib Dems in taking a fanatical pro-European line. Those who supported Brexit will reject the party on account of its positioning. Those who opposed Brexit failed to take the chance to vote for the party when an entire General Election campaign was fought in opposition to Brexit. In fact, the party's poll share actually declined in the election, from 8% to 7% - a result few expected, even outside the party. In addition, many who opposed Brexit have mentally moved on from the issue, on account of the absence, at least at time of writing, of any catastrophic decline in Britain's fortunes on the domestic or international stage. It's just too difficult to prove the effect of Brexit will be as bad as the Remain movement continues to suggest.

If it can be shown in the future to have had a negative impact, unless it's dramatic and clear cut, few will care to spent their time looking back. You can be right but you can still be ignored as yesterday's soothsayers – not relevant to today's agenda.

It is compellingly self-evident that a Lib Dem recovery based on a pro-European stance is a hope rather than a prediction. The facts, as laid down in a series of observable events, suggests that this

simply isn't going to happen, even if the party continues to expend vast amounts of time and effort fighting a position which has already been decided.

The Lib Dems have an additional problem. The Labour Leader has promised continued membership of the European 'customs union' post-Brexit. Effectively, this is a similar position to the one offered by the Liberal Democrats, and more simply expressed. The announcement further increases the likelihood that anyone solely motivated by the case to Remain will default to the Labour Party, as they have a realistic chance of assuming power while at best the liberal Democrats will only be partners in a coalition.

Three scenarios – three destinations

Let us now put together all the analysis in a useful three scenario context. These scenarios represent the three most likely options, as determined by the observed actions and words of the party since 2015, and especially since the appointment of its new leader, Vince Cable, in the summer of 2017.

In each case, the intention is to base the evaluation of credible assumptions which most plausibly outline the likely behaviour of the party in each particular case. The intention here is not to WILL a particular outcome, but rather to follow the evidence towards the most logical and empirically probable destination.

Scenario 1 – Continue European 'Remainer' position as core agenda.

Scenario 2 – Accept Brexit and campaign for best deal possible.

Scenario 3 – 'Grass roots' local action plus national liberal themes.

Let's consider each of these in turn.

Scenario 1 – Continue European 'Remainer' position as core agenda

This is electoral suicide. The evidence shows that, whatever the merits of the Remain position morally or intellectually, this will not generate a significant advancement for the Liberal Democrats. Talking about resisting the outcome of the referendum - or seeking to reverse it - with a second referendum is a recipe for 'flat-lining.'

All the evidence from the 2013 Eastleigh by-election onwards has proved that there is no strategic benefit in adhering to such a one-issue approach. The public have not responded and are unlikely to start responding.

Note that whatever residual benefit may have accrued to the party from taking a persistently Remain stance is further weakened by the Labour leadership which announced an intention to remain in the customs union. While this brings its own problems, it also provides a home for those

who would prefer a dilution of the Brexit programme: they're more likely to vote for a party with hundreds of MPs rather than a party with 12. If the Liberal Democrats insist on maintaining this campaigning position, they will simply be ignored.

Scenario 2 – Accept Brexit and campaign for best deal possible

This is a realistic and credible position, but does not provide a unique narrative for the party versus the other options on offer. However, there is a possibility that, should the dialogue between the British Government and the European negotiations falter, then there would be at least a purpose in having Lib Dems in a studio to tell their perspective on what the Government ought to do. This is a far more credible position than the current one: everyone knows that Government will not wish to be seen to back out of Brexit so there's no point in asking the Lib Dems to repeat a position which nobody else intends to implement.

A lack of momentum and political clout in Parliament means that the only way in which the Lib Dems can secure some profile and respect is by engaging in the current agenda, instead of harking back to the past agenda – one which is gone and won't be returning in the current political cycle.

Scenario 3 – 'Grass roots' local action plus national liberal themes

Based on historical observation, this is the best strategy for the Liberal Democrats. The public still cares about local issues, and these have traditionally been a strong point of the party since its formation three decades ago. Campaigning materials from the Liberal movement prior to this also underlined the unglamorous but undeniable reality of 'pavement politics.'

During a period of austerity, fixing potholes wins votes. Resolving local services provides a credibility which is not available through discussing the case for remain. Making the Liberal Democrats relevant locally is the only tested methodology which can win back the powerful position the party enjoyed in past times. That's a long and winding road, but it works. It also requires the party to accept, at the highest level, that there is no particularly influential role for the Lib Dems to play in the grand debate about Brexit and how to do it. This is not a debate in which the party currently has and perceived role, except to make gloomy predictions and hope that, afterwards, they can say 'I told you so.' Even that, while possibly true and potentially satisfying at a personal level, will not provide any bedrock for a rebuild of the party.

At peak, the Liberal Democrats held over 5,300 Local Government seats across the United Kingdom, compared to its tally of around 1,800 in 2017. To win a significant proportion of those back will only be achieved with door-knocking and leafletting on the issues which people are talking about, and that's not Brexit. Since many are predicting a softer Brexit than the one originally envisaged by the pro-Brexit campaigners, it's unlikely that Lib Dems will gain any currency by calling for an even softer one.

What are the signs?

For all this analysis, what matters is the reality. At present, that reality appears to be pointing towards no shift at all in the Liberal Democrat position. Repeated statements by the party attempt to link almost everything to the Brexit agenda.⁸

On 12th October 2017, Leader **Vince Cable** said:

“While many observers were sceptical about the government’s ability to successfully negotiate a Brexit deal in just two years, it is still something of a surprise how rapidly the talks have stalled. The Prime Minister’s willingness to entertain the possibility of no-deal scenario is utterly reckless, and businesses will no doubt now be accelerating their contingency plans. This divided cabinet are putting personal politics above the national interest, and we are all going to pay for it.”

At about the same time, former Liberal Democrat Leader **Tim Farron** commented:

“The Government’s inability to make progress on negotiations is leaving farmers in the lurch and creating huge uncertainty. Farmers need a commitment from the Government that the billions of pounds currently received by British farmers from the EU will still be available.”

This is a slightly surprising statement given that there has been discussion about radical reform of the farming subsidy regime, not least in the interests of the environment. However, that intention appears also to have been subsumed in the larger Remain agenda.

Deputy Leader of the party **Jo Swinson**, added her voice to the calls for a rethink and calling for a second referendum, is quoted saying: “The public must have the chance to change their mind if they want to, once the government comes back with a deal.”

Lib Dem MP for Kingston and Surbiton, **Ed Davey** who lost his seat in 2015 and regained it in 2017. added in his role as Liberal Democrat Home Affairs Spokesperson:

“The Home Office can barely cope now let alone once the true impact of Brexit is felt. The department already suffers from chronic underfunding and the inability to get on with the day-to-day job, being under political pressure to deliver on ludicrous Conservative policies like reducing immigration to the tens-of-thousands. If the Government can’t even organise its own departments, how can we trust them to negotiate a good deal on behalf of the country?”

And Jo Swinson again;

⁸ The following statements are taken from official press lines, subsequently cited in local press releases.

“With six months of negotiations already gone, the cabinet is still in open revolt. The upshot is the government has been unable to draw up a detailed plan to protect jobs and living standards from a hard Brexit.

“If ministers continue to advocate tearing up Britain’s membership of the single market and customs union, they have a duty to come clean on what will take their place.

And Vince Cable again;

“The government is now too weak to deliver a Brexit that will satisfy anyone, least of all the British people. And Brexit should not be a spectator sport – the people should have the final say on any deal.”

The attacks have covered just about every aspect of British politics. Ed Davey has also commented:

“It now appears Theresa May’s transition plans ignore the needs of the NHS and British business for workers from our European neighbours. This won't just hit our health services and industry, it also means British people wanting to move to Europe will lose many of their rights within eighteen months. The Conservatives now seem willing to damage our NHS, our economy and opportunities for young Brits in their rush for an extreme Brexit.”

Leader Vince Cable even took the unorthodox step of delivering a speech to Brexit protestors at Conservative conference in Manchester in 2017:

“We are in Manchester because the Conservative Party are here and we want them to hear our voices – to tell Theresa May and Boris Johnson that we are not 'citizens of nowhere', but people who are proud to be British, and proud to be European... If the government is unable to deliver the deal the Brexiteers promised, the people are entitled to a vote on it – including the option of an exit from Brexit. That is why, as Liberal Democrats, we demand a vote on the final deal, and will work with decent minded people of all parties to deliver it.”

Other commentary by the Lib Dems related to new car sales having fallen for a sixth month in September 2017, which they blamed on Brexit. Apparently, concerns about the effect of road transport on the environment was no longer an issue.

They slammed Liam Fox and David Davis, saying they “blithely ignore the economic and political reality of Brexit, while trying to justify their collective failures over the last year.”

They accused of a decline in the construction industry on Brexit, with Cable stating,

“A year ago ministers promised to get Britain building again, but their plan now has severe subsidence... Brexiteers suggest that Brexit fears are not acting as a break on the economy. But builders now downing tools would respectfully seem to disagree.”

They questioned the process of negotiation, with Mr Brake saying:

“EU negotiators are rightly wondering who really calls the shots in this weak and divided government, Theresa May or Boris Johnson. While the Brexit talks hit a brick wall and the UK economy stalls, the Tories are busy fighting amongst themselves. Every day brings us closer to a chaotic hard Brexit that will damage people’s livelihoods for a generation. The government needs to protect the economy by properly engaging in these negotiations and committing to stay permanently in the single market and customs union.”

In even more shrill terms, the Lib Dem Leader suggested the collapse of the Conservative administration:

“... the government is falling apart. Liam Fox is saying we will have 40 trade deals agreed on the first day of Brexit, yet the prime minister has now been warned by senior officials that seeking new agreements at the cost of membership of the single market and customs union would cause severe damage to the economy for a generation. It is hard to see how Theresa May can continue as prime minister if she allows the Foreign Secretary to remain in office, undermining the government at home and abroad in Brexit negotiations.”

Words such as ‘desperate’ and ‘crisis’ populated repeated statements by the party, in a tone which indicated the decline of the British economy and its political credibility are all but inevitable. They even resorted to giving the Prime Minister advice on how to run her Cabinet, informing her that:

“The only way to restore confidence is for the Prime Minister to get a grip, sack dissenters like Boris Johnson and fight to keep the UK in single market and customs union.”

This then led to the claim of the Prime Minister’s impotence:

“Theresa May’s refusal to deny that Boris Johnson is un-sackable - in contrast to previous interviews - shows that she has "gone from being a lame-duck prime minister to a sitting-duck prime minister.”

Mr Brake added:

“Make no mistake: Boris Johnson is now driving the car. For the British people trapped in the back, this is a terrifying prospect. He might find it fun hurtling toward the cliff shouting ‘cripes!’, but this threatens to crash the UK economy and blunt the life chances of future generations.”

Perhaps ironically, they even resorted to tackling the hugely sensitive electoral issue – for the Lib Dems – of tuition fees, with Cable, the Minister who technically opened the debate on the floor of the House of Commons which led to the Lib Dem U-Turn on the issue – accusing a mooted Tory rethink as a ‘panicky bribe’:

“I just question where this money will be coming from. Ministers keep telling us there isn’t a magic money tree. And Brexit will slow growth and reduce tax receipts.”

There is a school of thought which recommends repeated reminders of key political messages. It's good marketing to do that when the message is resonant and clear. However, such a strategy is utterly pointless if the message is neither resonant nor relevant.

We suggest that the electoral evidence has proven this is the case with the emphatic repetition of the anti-Brexit agenda currently promoted by the Liberal Democrats. Even if they're right, nobody currently cares.

Thus, at best, it is a high-risk investment for the future, predicated on the hope that the Brexit agenda will fail and that the Lib Dems can capitalise on it at some time in the years ahead. We suggest this simply doesn't accord with all the evidence, and is further compromised as a strategy by Labour's decision to entertain the UK's continued membership of the Customs Union, which essentially places the Labour Party in the general political location which the Lib Dems had hoped to occupy.

As long as the Lib Dems refuse to accept these political realities and refocus their very limited resources towards patiently rebuilding of their core local government base, then they will not grow in Parliament. Every experienced Lib Dem activist knows this. It seems the leadership refuse to accept this vital ingredient in the recovery of the party.

Conclusion

Will the Liberal Democrats once again fail to read the signs and continue on a path which leads to no significant recovery in the foreseeable future? At present, it does look as if there is no appetite to take a strategic look at the party's positioning - or the potential flaws in its apparent obsession with portraying itself as the single most pro-European party in British politics.

The additional difficulty is that, if it continues to aim for this, it is effectively writing itself out of the script, as any objective analysis of recent electoral performance indicates. Even if they were in some sense 'right' about the future, this will only be proved *in the future*. That has the logically obvious implication that there is no benefit to the party's success *now*. When the future comes, a platform of 'I told you so' has no history of success in winning elections.

Brexit may be hard or it may be soft. Either way, nobody really believes this will be determined by the Liberal Democrats. As long as Lib Dems persist in presenting themselves as the party of European Union membership, they will be accused of living in the past, or, alternatively, will simply be ignored as a movement with nothing new to say about a subject which has already been decided and which no longer defines the battleground in British politics.

While the late Charles Kennedy unquestionably believed passionately in a European Union and in Britain's role within it, the forces which overthrew him, including Nick Clegg, expressed the same position but without the same credibility. Their inability to present their case coherently was a profound failure of philosophical rigour and political consistency – and goes a long way to revealing

why, since Mr Kennedy's enforced departure from the leadership, the movement has had little gravitas or success in influencing the European debate or, for that matter, anything else.

The Liberal Democrats have a long and praiseworthy commitment to international politics. However, they appear to have confused this with a commitment to homogenising a continent for a perceived greater good. There was a time when Liberals saw the greatest good as co-existence with other countries on the basis of mutual respect rather than conformity on a multinational scale. There may be many reasons to pursue the same ends, such as peace, economic progress and social harmony. However, that is a world apart from enforcing the same regulations in a simple but inflexible fashion. Yet the acceptance of this nuance appears to be far from Lib Dem thinking at present, making it impossible for them to show the versatility to modify their message to the prevailing political realities.

The Soviet Union was energetically resisted by Western powers because it sought to put the collective above the individual. Yet the ethos of collective best interest now appears to overrule individual divergence, especially when the divergence is regarded as either self-harming, or not in keeping with the convenience of international trade. It is this, in large part, which caused the British people to reject the European project. And it is the Lib Dem failure to show any empathy with this view which distances them from such a large proportion of the electorate.

If the Liberal Democrats fail to grasp the importance of diversity at a constitutional and regulatory level, they will – in a very practical sense – continue to promote a contradiction to the core philosophy of the party: the contradiction being the claim that there is nothing relativist about voting Liberal Democrat – a position promoted by the former leader, Nick Clegg, who lost 49 seats in 2015 and went on to lose his own in 2017.

The Lib Dems are perfectly entitled to continue on their current path, and to repeatedly highlight the dangers of Brexit to anyone willing to listen. The difficulty is that nobody is listening to them on this matter – and the electoral evidence since 2013 has proved it.

As long as the Liberal Democrat movement is determined to focus on the European dimension as their prime line of political activism, they will remain outside the political mainstream, just as UKIP are perceived by many as having had their day for precisely the same reason.

There is a chance the Lib Dems can recover across the next decade or so to reasonable double-digit numbers of Parliamentarians, if they reclaim the local campaigning ground they owned so effectively in the past. However, if they refuse to accept the reality – that the Brexit boat has sailed with everybody else on it – they will stay on the shoreline, gazing out as the political agenda of Britain sails away without them. In an ironic twist of fate, the longer the Liberal Democrats cling to their fanatical Europhile narrative *as their core agenda*, the more this will cause them – rather than their competitors – to risk appearing isolated on a 'political desert island' where nobody else is interested in doing business, and to which no-one else has the slightest motivation to send a rescue party.

About the Author



Lembit Öpik was born in Northern Ireland and, after attending Bristol University to study Philosophy, worked in multinational corporation Procter & Gamble.

In 1997 he was elected as the Liberal Democrat Member of Parliament in 1997 where he served for 13 years, quickly rising to the position of Party Leader in the Wales. During his leadership the party doubled its Parliamentary seats in the nation and became the Official Welsh Opposition Party in the Commons. Lembit also served as

Shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland for a decade.

Lembit was elected Senior Vice President and served on the Federal Executive Committee for 17 years. In 2012, he correctly predicted the Liberal Democrats faced electoral disaster unless they changed leader and refocused on a more authentic liberal narrative. Now Lembit works in public affairs and broadcasting, as a presenter and as a commentator.

