

# Scottish Liberal Democrats go virtual

This is the text of Willie Rennie's speech to the Scottish Liberal Democrat virtual autumn conference, delivered earlier today.

The conference, all online, is based around the theme Partnership for Recovery:

"The little things.

Can't hug your mum.

Couldn't walk in the mountains for months.

Can't go to the pub.

No Zumba, no coffee mornings, no fans at the football, no music.

The fabric of a liberal society locked up in a cupboard.

The pain.

No hip operation. No gall bladder removed. Cancer not detected until it's too late.

Suffering in silence through fear of the virus or not wanting to bother the doctor when they are busy.

The freedom provided by our great National Health Service

rolled back.

The tragedy.

Over four and a half thousand people dead.

Lives lost here because of this deadly virus.

One of the highest death rates in the whole world.

From how we live our lives to the end of our lives our world has been turned.

These are dark days.

And when we look back at this time – and we will – I want to look back and know we did our bit.

We took decisions in the national interest, not our own interest.

To save lives. To cut the pain. To protect our way of life.

We worked in partnership.

We offered answers, not just questions, not just accusations.

We put forward plans for the future, not just critiques of the past.

And we helped people understand.

Thousands of people came directly to us for answers, for finance, for support.

In desperate need.

We spoke to ministers, worked up solutions, found answers.

But we did do the right thing.

We are doing the right thing.

Because this virus is not going away.

It won't go away just because there is an election coming.

It won't go away for a referendum.

As we know to our great cost in thousands of lives – Scotland is not immune.

And we are working hard to get this right.

I have told you how we worked constructively.

But we have also challenged when Scottish ministers have got it wrong.

And when they weren't preparing well enough.

The opportunity to get ready over the summer for the second wave in the autumn was missed.

Instead of boasting about an elimination strategy Scotland should have had a strategy for the second wave.

Liberal Democrats called for this.

But we are where we are.

What do we need now?

A testing regime like Germany and South Korea.

A tracing system to hunt down and drive out the virus.

Quarantine spot checks to check compliance.

And a strategy backed by the evidence with buy in from the public who have made ever greater sacrifices. They expect government to do its bit too.

That is why the partnership we have built needs to endure, at least until this virus is under control.

You never know, it may turn the tide on the toxic atmosphere that has divided our country through a decade of arguments on Independence and Brexit.

Out of great adversity may come a little bit of hope. A new politics for our country.

Perhaps that's me dreaming again but perhaps we should all be allowed to dream a little.

Dream of a new future.

A new future where people's loyalty to their country is not questioned because they don't agree on a policy.

A new future where we put more into the planet than we take out.

A new future where fairness is weaved into the fabric of our lives.

A new future where what we aspire for our society becomes the everyday norm.

Where people can aspire to grow, accessing free education that lifts them up, where good services boost their mental health, where a warm home makes their family safe, where our NHS keeps us healthy. and where we can live in our later years in comfort and happiness.

It's not fighting, it's living.

But that new future demands our focus, our undivided attention, needle sharp precision.

So much energy, so much heat, so much anger.

Over the last decade so much on things that, to be frank, just do not matter.

So much on flags, on the name of our country, on relations

with our neighbouring countries.

People hunting for a job, desperate for hospital treatment, waiting for mental health support, young children benefiting from nursery, and students a good education.

They can't wait.

They can't wait for years behind yet more arguments about independence.

These people don't have years.

They need action now.

And people are exhausted.

Exhausted following years of arguments about Brexit, independence and now with the pandemic. People want a bit of hope, of unity, of partnership.

If the last decade was about what divides us.

Let us make the next decade not just about what unites us but much more importantly about what makes our lives better.

And that is the question. It's the question for everyone in next year's election.

Because the election is not really about the swings and the percentages, the political winners and losers. It's about the direction of the country for the next decade.

The Liberal Democrats are a vehicle for change.

A change from the decade of division with the Conservatives and SNP.

Of Boris Johnson, of Alex Salmond, of independence, of Brexit.

And for the next decade we don't need to choose between the chaos of Boris Johnson and the chaos of independence

There is another way.

The Scottish Liberal Democrats represent a third way.

The third way means working in partnership.

A partnership for recovery.

A partnership to focus on a green and fair recovery from the pandemic.

A partnership – putting aside our differences on the constitution.

Whatever your views on independence, reasonable people would agree that we need to put aside our differences.

So we can work together for a needle-sharp focus on green jobs, strong childcare, excellent mental health services and a world class education system.

Reasonable people will think it's right to focus on a partnership for recovery.

At the heart of the recovery must be education.

A great liberal cause.

Young people have been let down by the drift down of standards after 14 years of this government.

Once the best in the world, now just average.

And that's been compounded this year.

I want to set out proposals to raise Scottish education up again.

In education, almost every success story mentions the personal involvement of a good teacher.

But look at what teachers have had to put up with this year.

- \* Told to teach online when the government funded laptops for pupils were held back in a warehouse;
- \* Told at the last minute to get all pupils back to school, after weeks spent preparing for blended learning;
- \* Told weeks after they'd already started teaching what the course and exams should look like.
- \* Told their pupil assessments had been ditched for an algorithm.

Teachers and pupils deserve better.

So we are going to reach out across Scotland to offer every young person an education system that is the best again, that stretches, that gives them world-class qualifications for high wage and high skilled jobs.

At its heart we will put teachers in charge.

Teachers have been creative and dedicated in this crisis

By contrast Education Scotland, the SQA and ministers have been slow-footed, showing little leadership, avoiding hard decisions, with few good ideas.

This needs to change.

The balance in education in Scotland must change.

Out should go centralised bureaucracies and their derisory "token" teacher on their committees.

In must come an education system overseen by people with current teaching experience.

We will restore the independence of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education.

The SQA and Education Scotland will be run by people with

direct teaching experience. Staff seconded in from schools and colleges.

Let's get the experts back in charge.

Then let's focus on the fundamentals.

Without literacy, the door to every other part of learning remains closed.

Teachers will lead a literacy task force to change the primary school curriculum to make sure that no child slips through the net on reading and writing.

Without maths, none of the STEM subjects, science, engineering and technology is possible.

We will ask teachers to lead reforms of the way primary schools tackle maths.

In secondary schools we will bring back principal teachers for each of the STEM subjects and for each science.

That will give a proper career path for graduates in STEM subjects within teaching.

This needs to be done soon.

After 14 years of this government we need to get on with change.

So by this time next year I want teacher-led education in place in Scotland.

I want teachers to be at the centre of how we make Scottish education the best again.

We will review their terms and conditions, and increase their pay, in return for the central professional role they will play.



They will have new roles to lead literacy and numeracy task forces, to steer the direction of Education Scotland.

We will get excellent teachers into every school:

- \* A new “teacher premium” for schools in disadvantaged areas to supplement pay and attract the best teachers for the schools in greatest need;

- \* Optional three-year packages for probationary teachers, to help get new graduates into hard-to-fill areas.

- \* Our plans – especially for STEM subjects – will make teaching attractive for people wanting to change career later in life.

You can’t just magic-up teachers. You have to make sure it is a respected profession, with good career opportunities to attract and retain the best graduates.

The proposals I have made today will see us work in partnership with teachers for recovery in education.

And we need an industrial partnership for economic recovery.

Ten years ago the SNP promised 28,000 jobs, with Scotland becoming a world manufacturing base for offshore renewables.

A month ago the contracts for 114 wind turbine platforms for the Forth outer estuary were awarded.

A Scottish yard bid for just four of them. And didn’t get any.

That company is part owned by the Scottish Government. It has a 34% equity share.

All 114 will be made in the Middle East and China.

And now the Scottish Government has refused to underwrite the work at BiFab, passing up the opportunity for future jobs.

So much for Alex Salmond's promised a "Saudi Arabia of renewables."

If all it took was fine words we'd have thousands more jobs in the sector.

The Scottish Government has seven economic ministers, spread across three different ministries.

Sadly, these are practically the only jobs it has created.

If all it took was creating new ministerial posts, we'd win every single windfarm .

We need an industrial strategy that delivers jobs, not words and ministers.

We need government to plan and co-ordinate the changes needed for credible and effective bids to manufacture renewable energy devices in Scotland.

All of our industrial and manufacturing skills and might need to be brought together.

It needs all our yards, from Fife, to Hunterston, to Campbeltown, to Ardersier, Nigg, Shetland and the Western Isles to be brought together for giant projects.

We need to scale-up.

We need a world-sized business to have a chance of world-class projects.

If somebody is spending £1.4billion on wind turbines within eyesight of the Scottish shoreline, then Scottish industry must be in a position to win a contract for more than just the photography.

We need a routemap, costed, funded and realistic.

And if it needs changes to the UK Government's Contract for

Difference we will work in partnership with the UK Government to make that happen.

We must work in partnership with industry, with government, with the workforce to make this happen. It's far too important not to.

People have struggled from the isolation, the lack of support, services shut down.

We know the virus pandemic is matched by the economic pandemic, but that will be matched by the mental health pandemic.

Waits were already long.

Young people waiting over a year for treatment.

Thousands of adults wait too.

But the waits are even longer now.

At the outset of the pandemic there were already a record number of children waiting over a year for treatment. Now they number more than 1,500.

It's inevitable that this has got worse as some services were scaled back in response to the virus.

But it is still heartbreaking to see many more children now struggle at the back of one of the longest queues in the entire health service.

Young people have experienced months of disruption, loss of freedom, grief and the removal of contact with loved ones.

For many that stress is on top of existing conditions.

Waiting over a year for help must feel like a lifetime.

The Scottish Government's old strategy already wasn't working.

That is why Scottish Liberal Democrats will deliver a recovery plan that can meet existing and heightened demand, including immediate new steps to seriously expand the workforce.

More walk-in services at A&E and crisis centres.

More prevention with school counsellors.

Mental health first-aiders in every workplace.

More professionals trained.

Listen to this. There are the same number of child psychiatrists being trained today as there were five years ago.

We are never going to be able to treat young people fairly and quickly at that rate.

The partnership for recovery must have our mental health at its heart.

Our care homes, our carers and our staff have been at the wild frontline of this pandemic.

Too often poorly paid.

Almost always undervalued.

Yet we expected them to step up when it mattered.

We saw the reports from Spain of care home residents abandoned when the virus swept through.

Thanks to the dedication of our staff that did not happen here.

So now is the moment of reckoning.

The reform of the care sector has been kicked around.

Now we need to fix it.

Of course, people will want to debate ownership.

And whether the service is run in your local community or by St. Andrews House in Edinburgh.

Some are attracted to a National Care Service.

When I look at that I worry that they have only got as far as thinking up the name of it, not how it will work.

So let me be clear.

Liberal Democrats will not support a repeat of the calamity of the centralisation of the police and all the problems that it brought.

It removed local control, the financial savings were never realised, and it cost more, and it cost lives too.

The National Care Service – when it comes – mustn't be more of the same.

We need to give our elderly people a good, safe quality of life.

That means a proper pay rise for care workers.

And a new career structure to reward them, and give them all a career ladder that boosts their skills and pay at every step.

This should be the positive legacy from this pandemic.

A social care system for elderly people, for sick people, for people in need.

That we can all be proud of.

I have to tell you that one of the most moving experiences I have had recently was when I met the families of care home residents.

Their mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers are in their

twilight years.

They don't have much time left with us.

But they have not been able to touch, hug, hold hands or in some cases even see their loved ones through a window.

It's just not right that when they need their families most they are not allowed to be with them.

So I spoke to ministers in private, I asked in public, I gathered support across the country.

And together we made the change.

They will soon be able to meet together – safely.

That is the power of partnership.

So as I close, let me say “thank you” to all those, in all parts of our country, from every background, in all walks of life who have worked in this crisis to help their fellow citizens.

Let's work together, let's work in partnership, a partnership for recovery.”

# Willie Rennie's

# Scottish



# Liberal Democrats

Partnership for every

