

Cole-Hamilton welcomes the latest LibDem councillor – and dreams of a theme park

The latest Liberal Democrat councillor was elected at Thursday's by election in Edinburgh, and Scottish leader Alex Cole-Hamilton used this "historic victory" as the pillar of his speech to the Scottish Liberal Democrat spring conference in Dundee.

There is a now a corner of West Edinburgh made solid gold by her success. It is represented at every level of democracy by our party and our party alone. I'm thinking of establishing some kind of theme park.

He said: "Conference, let's hear it for Councillor Fiona Bennett! How good does that sound?"

"If you look at Fiona's career, you will see a life dedicated to public service, to helping people – whether that's through her time as an NHS nurse, or through casework in the office of Wendy Chamberlain MP.

"Improving the lives of her community and the people around her is what Fiona is all about.

“And she will now do that to great effect from the city chambers of our nation’s capital.

“Fiona ran a campaign forged in the finest traditions of our party and by so doing she, and her team, delivered the biggest local authority by-election victory in our history.



The by election count was held on the third floor of the Council HQ Waverley Court where Fiona Bennett was declared the new councillor for Corstorphine/Murrayfield ward PHOTO ©2023 The Edinburgh Reporter

“There is a now a corner of West Edinburgh made solid gold by her success. It is represented at every level of democracy by our party and our party alone. I’m thinking of establishing some kind of theme park.

“But my goodness, won’t those people feel well served.

“Fiona and her team are just the tip of the spear in the strategy I launched in Hamilton. Because, conference as I told you then, 150 Rising is more than just a slogan. It’s a recognition of the fact that success at local government

should be an end for our party in and of itself.

“That by electing Scottish Liberal Democrat councillors we can improve communities and change lives. It’s in our DNA. And the engine rooms that we are establishing around the country will help to lift our vote at every parliamentary election as well.

“Conference, Corstorphine/Murrayfield is just the latest seat we’ve captured from the SNP since I became leader, and it will not be the last.

“Constituencies that used to have an MP that fought for them, like East Dunbartonshire, will know that service once again under the care of people like Susan Murray.

“And conference, today I want to tell you about another top flight parliamentary target for me at the coming General Election.

“In 2015, we lost a legend of our movement. Charles Kennedy was our friend and a mentor to many of us in this room.

“As public servants, it is incumbent on us to reflect the better natures of the people we seek to serve. Nobody did that with more decency and grace than Charles.

“So let me tell you Conference, it is my intention to bring Charles Kennedy’s old constituency of Ross, Skye and Lochaber back into the Liberal Democrat fold at the next General Election.

“And mark my words, in Charles’ memory, we will see Angus MacDonald elected to Westminster.

“When I won my own seat from the SNP in 2016, the bookies put my chances of winning at just 65/1.

“So when one website had me at 14/1 to become the next First Minister of Scotland, it seemed like a solid bet.

“I’m flattered to have been contacted by so many people.

“I’ve given it serious consideration.

“As you know, my readiness thermometer is always at maximum, but now is not my moment.

“Seriously though Conference, the contest to lead any party should be a meeting of ideas, a comparison of different and positive visions as to how to take our country forward.

“The SNP are haemorrhaging fair minded, reasonable voters, who aren’t fussed about the constitution. They are looking for a party to inspire them again.

“I can only imagine what they must make of this grim spectacle – these candidates vying to be the last nationalist First Minister of Scotland.

“Because the nationalist star is on the wane, and they know it.

“The independence project has stalled, and I am glad of it.

“And make no mistake, when they lose power, the Scottish Liberal Democrats will be part of what’s next.

“There are many things which loom large over Nicola Sturgeon as she closes the door on Bute House.

“Crushing waiting times in our NHS, ferries and recycling schemes in chaos, and a Scotland more divided than ever.

“That’s before we even get to the divisions in the SNP.

“Because what this leadership race shows is that even the people at the very top of the nationalist movement really only agree on one thing – and one thing alone – and that is breaking up the UK.

“Pull on that thread, as Christine Jardine says, and the whole

tapestry unravels.

“Because there are no other principles or priorities. Just hollow nationalism.

“I don’t pretend we as Liberal Democrats agree on everything all the time. We are a feisty bunch, and those standing orders won’t re-write themselves.

“Instead, I only ask that when we do disagree, we listen to each other and we disagree well.

“That’s grown up politics.

“Conference, there is a disconnect between the focus of the governing parties and the needs and interests of this country.

“Put simply, the SNP and Green priorities are not your priorities.

“They are taking people for granted.

“And it shows.

“Nicola Sturgeon once said she wanted to be judged on education – remember that?

“Well at the current rate of progress it will take 133 years to close the literacy gap in primary schools.

“Well at least that’s some sort of progress, because on numeracy the attainment gap between the richest and poorest primary children hasn’t closed at all.

“Conference, a whole generation of children and young people have been failed by her government.

“Our teachers and our children deserve better.

“Liberal Democrats would always pay our teachers what they deserve, and reverse the explosion of temporary and zero hours

contracts.

“Make our classrooms an inviting place to teach again by tackling violence in our schools.

“We would build on our success in early years by introducing a Nursery Premium for children in deprived areas.

“Scrap national testing and the pressure it puts on kids and staff.

“And for older children, I want to introduce a national legal entitlement to youth work for every young person in Scotland.

“As liberals we know that growth, development, innovation all flow from education. From our schools, our colleges and our world-class universities.

“I want us to make things again. To imagine things again. To seize on the abilities of our peoples and to bring forth a new enlightenment in Scotland.

“We were once the best in the world at this.

“And we can be again.

“Conference, to harness the minds of Scotland, we need to look after the minds of Scotland.

“Mental health services were swamped before the pandemic. Add to that the long shadow of lockdown, the pressures of the cost of living crisis, and spiralling waiting lists.

“But the SNP have just met that reality by cutting £50m from the mental health budget.

“That’s money that could have trained more staff or put more counsellors in schools.

“Humza Yousaf’s NHS Recovery Plan promised the eradication of mental health waiting lists by March 2023.

“Conference, look at the calendar, it’s March now, and the government is nowhere.

“Even the lucky ones who are seen ‘on time’ are still waiting 18 weeks.

“That is far too long for anyone to wait if they are experiencing suicidal thoughts, depression or anxiety.

“People deserve better than that. People are demanding better than that.

“Conference, when those 18-week waiting time targets are finally met, there should be no stopping us.

“It should be the trigger for a new Liberal Democrat plan to cut those routine waiting times in half.

“Conference, Scotland needs new hope for mental health.

“Scottish Liberal Democrats would reverse the cuts and re-establish a dedicated mental health minister.

“Create mental health beds for young people in all parts of Scotland, because there are none north of this city of Dundee.

“Ramp up training so that every workplace can benefit from a mental health first aider.

“That’s how Liberal Democrats would create a properly funded, world-beating system to tackle Scotland’s mental health crisis.

“It’s a blueprint which shows why it is essential that Liberal Democrats are part of what’s next.

“You see Conference, at the very heart of our Liberal vision for Scotland is to treat people as close to home as possible, as quickly as possible.

“That isn’t happening.

“Ask the nurses and midwives overworked on every shift because there are 6,000 vacancies in their profession.

“Ask the new mums forced to travel two hours down the treacherous A9 to give birth because their local unit was closed down.

“And ask Maria, a Ukrainian refugee who travelled back to see her doctor in Kyiv because the air raid sirens and drone strikes were less daunting than waiting for treatment in the Scottish NHS.

“All for the want of basic primary care.

“Conference, Humza Yousaf should be embarrassed.

“If he is the answer, then it’s time Scotland asked a different question.

“We are already clearing up his mess at grassroots level.

“Beatrice Wishart campaigning for a replacement hospital for Lerwick.

“Jamie Stone and Cllr Ron Gunn fighting for a consultant-led maternity unit for those mums in the far north.

“Cass Macdonald taking a petition to Downing Street for long Covid to be recognised as a workplace injury for key workers.

“We are offering change from the ground up.

“The new ideas and innovative thinking needed to reimagine our health service will also come from those who are embedded within it.

“It’s why we need that Health and Social Care Staff Assembly, to put their expertise at the heart of the response to this crisis.

“It’s why the ministerial takeover of social care needs

scrapped, not salvaged. If there is a billion pounds available for a vast and unnecessary bureaucracy, put it into frontline services and staff instead.

“Remember Conference, ours was the only party to oppose the National Care Service from the very start.

“Momentum is now on our side.

“This is a campaign we can and must win.

“We will always resist any power grab by ministers in Edinburgh that seeks to asset strip our communities.

“That’s why ten years ago we stood alone against the centralisation of the police – and we were proven right.

“Our party was and remains the party of local power. Devolution to Scotland, and devolution from Holyrood down to our communities.

“Conference, the SNP and Greens have no interest in reforming our United Kingdom. That would undermine their efforts to sow grievance and hostility towards this broken system. In truth, reform is the thing the nationalists fear most.

“I’m talking about a power surge for local democracy through federalism, equal votes, a written constitution, and reform of the House of Lords.

“So let’s scare the stuffing out of them and fix our broken politics.

“Good governance is the precursor to everything good that we want to do – making education the best again, rebuilding the NHS, and getting the cost of living crisis under control.

“And as we heard from Ed (Davey) yesterday, that starts with restoring integrity by ejecting the Conservatives from government. Our record-breaking by-election wins are proof

positive that we are part of what's next at Westminster too.

"In this family of nations we have a common story, shared achievements and the same challenges.

"A great reform of our islands is within sight. It is the promise of our Great British future that we strive for. It is a federal future.

"In 1966 Bobby Kennedy said: "Only earthbound man still clings to the dark and poisoning superstition that his world is bounded by the nearest hill, his universe ends at river shore, his common humanity is enclosed in the tight circle of those who share his town, or his views, and the colour of his skin."

"He was talking about the politics of identity and division, ideologies which deflect blame and offer simplistic populist solutions to complex problems.

"Conference we live in a terrifying world.

"Our planet is on fire in the climate emergency.

"A virus which infects one nation will readily infect another, with no regard for the borders that divide them.

"And following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, we will come to look back on this time with an understanding that we were already living in the early days of a new Cold War.

"Conference, Scotland faces colossal and existential threats, they do not end at river's shore,

"and I know that our common humanity does not lie in a border or a flag.

"The answer is international cooperation through shared economic and scientific endeavour.

"But the SNP have squandered our reputation for business acumen and world-leading industry.

“The two ferries rusting in Port Glasgow mean that the other new vessels we need are now being built in Turkey.

“They sold thousands of square miles of our seabed on the cheap for windfarms to be built in foreign yards.

“And a deposit return scheme – a pigs ear of a good idea – that will put Scottish firms out of business and take Scottish produce off Scottish shelves.

“Billions of pounds,

“taxpayers’ money,

“poured down the sink.

“Is it any wonder business has no trust in the nationalists who say a new currency and central bank could be established in two months.

“Is it any wonder that business has no confidence in the Conservatives who cut us off from Europe and crashed the economy.

“Conference, the way is open to us.

“That’s why I’m listening to the voices of innovators and market leaders.

“I’m listening to the Liberal Democrat Business Entrepreneur Network.

“It’s why we have rising stars like Angus MacDonald – a former Entrepreneur of the Year – now standing as candidates for our party.

“They will help shape our offer to Scottish business.

“Because Liberal Democrats will be the party of responsible business in Scotland.

“Conference, I told you in Hamilton that one of the things that makes me proudest to be a Liberal Democrat is our internationalism. The fact we care passionately for people on the other side of the world that we may never meet.

“But increasingly those people are knocking at our door, seeking safe harbour on our shores.

“The poet Warsan Shire said “no one puts their child in a boat unless the water is safer than the land”.

“The Tories are punching down on the marginalised and the dispossessed once again. Gary Lineker speaks for all of us.

“They have become so miserable and shrivelled that they are trying to squeeze votes from the plight of refugees fleeing death and victims of human trafficking.

“Rishi Sunak, Douglas Ross, stop trying to break international law.

“By so doing, you diminish the offices you hold, you diminish our country, and you diminish its standing in the world.

Six months ago, my family opened our home to a Ukrainian design graduate, forced from Kyiv when the missiles started falling.

“Her life as a refugee actually began nine years ago when the Russians invaded her city of Donetsk and destroyed her home.

“The experience of hosting her has been amazing and it has enriched our lives in many ways.

“She has joined us at many family events.

“And in the evenings, she sometimes reads to us messages from Sasha, her cousin, who is on the Eastern Front, deployed in a forward position around the defence of Bakhmut – probably the worst place in the world right now.

“On weekends, she joins other Ukrainians in church halls to manufacture camouflage netting out of old green and brown clothing, to send to relatives fighting in the defence of Ukraine.

“Such examples remind us of just how close the privations of war actually are.

“Conference, we must remember that the people of Ukraine are not only fighting for their own territorial integrity, they are the front line for the free democracies of our world.

“We owe them a huge debt of thanks and we must insist that the UK Government supply them with everything they need to win.

“And what an honour it is to have Kira Rudik here with us today. The leader of our sister party in Ukraine. Kira’s presence demonstrates the power of Liberals standing together in defiance of authoritarianism and brutality.

“In 20 years of conference, I have never seen anything like that.

“Thank you again for being here Kira, we are honoured to have you, and we stand with you.

“Friends, Boris Johnson said that Ukraine should be at the front of the queue to join the European Union. He’s not wrong, but just think about that for a minute.

“After all his Brexit lies, that really grated, but it was recognition of the value and protection working with our European neighbours offers in terms of security and prosperity.

“We should be more united than ever with our nearest neighbours in the face of Russian aggression, the climate emergency, and the mass displacement of people.

“Our economic growth is below that of Russia, investment is

down, empty shelves, skills shortages, diminished on the world stage.

“Conference, Brexit has been a disaster.

“I still grieve for what we have lost.

“Charles Kennedy used to say that he was a Highlander, a Scot, a Brit and a European. Each was a critical part of his identity, without contradiction or conflict.

“Conference, make no mistake, Scottish Liberal Democrats are the most pro-European party there is. We do not apologise for it, and we do not deny it.

“I am a European to my fingertips. I believe in Europe for Europe’s sake.

“Conference, it is my mission to untangle the problems,

“to re-establish cultural and economic ties,

“to build back our close connections,

“to forge relationships with our European friends.

“It means re-establishing Erasmus, as our party has done in Wales.

“Getting back into the Horizon university research funding scheme.

“Mutual recognition of trades and professions so people can work across the UK and EU.

“We should be optimistic about the demonstratable shift in public opinion towards re-engaging with the European Union, and we should harness that.

“This country needs a party that will propose practical, tangible solutions to bring us closer to Europe.

“Conference, we are the ones they are looking for.

“Because you can take us out of Europe, but you’ll never take Europe out of us.

“We can secure all of this, because we are part of what’s next.

“Conference, the sands of Scottish politics are shifting in big and unpredictable ways.

“It’s a chance to transcend the worn-out divisions of the past and build something new.

“It’s why we do what we do, door by door, in the cold and in the dark.

“We do it for the child waiting years for mental health treatment.

“We do it for the family shivering while fossil fuel companies make billions.

“We do it for the people on our street and those on the other side of the world we will never meet.

“Fiona Bennett’s historic by-election result shows us the way. It is proof of concept that with our 150 rising strategy we are growing.

“That with a thousand seemingly tiny acts of public service we can move a mountain of public opinion.

“The SNP have lost sight of that. So when the fall comes for them, and come it will, they will be powerless to stop it.

“Change is coming for Scotland. New hope is on the way.

“And we will be part of what’s next.

“Thank you.”

If you are interested to find out more about the newest Liberal Democrat councillor then have a look at our coverage of the [Corstorphine/Murrayfield by election](#). We interviewed Fiona Bennett and you can watch that interview below. She won the by election on First Preference votes alone with no need to go to any further stages.