

Alex Cole Hamilton delivers speech to national conference

In his speech to the national Liberal Democrat conference in Bournemouth, Alex Cole Hamilton MSP for Edinburgh Western and the leader of the Scottish Liberal Democrats sets out his party's plans for a power surge for councils.

He said that the 2027 local elections strategy begins now with a mission to increase the number of LibDem councillors to 150 in four years' time.

We will start engine rooms of activity, in every ward, constituency and region, and give the communities of Scotland the gold-standard Liberal Democrat service they deserve.

Alex Cole Hamilton MSP, Scottish Liberal Democrat leader

This is the speech Mr Cole Hamilton delivered:

Conference, this is the first time I've addressed you in person since Willie passed the baton to me two years ago. Can I take this opportunity to thank you Willie for your leadership, your service to our party and your friendship over the years.

Willie mentioned I am the first Liberal Democrat parliamentarian to be officially sanctioned by the Kremlin. My Ukrainian house guest calls that Santa's good list.

And by the way, if you do nothing else at conference, do not miss Kira Rudik in this hall tomorrow, the leader of our sister party in Ukraine. In over 20 years of attending our conferences, I've never heard anything like her speech to us in Dundee earlier this year.

Conference, there are few things in life that cheer me more than the sight that greets me now. I am thrilled to my fingertips to be here.

I love this party. For nearly quarter of a century, I have served it at one time or another in every capacity: activist, staff, candidate, parliamentarian.

Wherever you are I feel at home.

The evidence of my devotion to this party can be found in the pages of a well-thumbed road atlas and a loyalty card for the Starbucks at Charnock Richard Services in Chorley.

It's why I drove a carload of young Liberals 9 hours down the M6 from Edinburgh to North Shropshire. It's why I drove them 11 hours to Frome.

And why I'll do it again in the 7 hours it'll take us to get to Mid Bedfordshire.

Friends, I come with news of the north, and it is good news.

The liberal revival is underway for us too and we have taken such inspiration from Ed's leadership and your victories in the south.

Last May, as they had done since I took over as leader, the pundits were writing us off – predicting that the Scottish local government elections would see us slip backwards.

Conference, we outperformed every other opposition party and increased our councillor base by a third.

It made me realise that the history of our movement is rooted in local politics and so too lies the promise of our future.

Because with success in local government we can change and improve the lot and lives of our communities in big, important ways.

From that kernel of realisation, emerged our strategy to grow our Scottish party and its fortunes in every community and at every level of government.

So here's the plan.

We will achieve all of that by commencing our campaign for the 2027 Scottish Local Council elections right now.

We call the strategy 150 Rising.

By seeking to increase the number of our Scottish councillors from 87 to over 150 in just 4 years' time, we will lift our vote at Westminster and Holyrood along the way.

We will start engine rooms of activity, in every ward, constituency and region, and give the communities of Scotland the gold-standard Liberal Democrat service they deserve.

I said I was bringing news from the North, but something tells me that what's been going on in Scotland may have captured your attention already.

First, of course, there was the shock resignation of Nicola Sturgeon.

Humza Yousaf won the bitter contest to succeed her. He enjoyed a honeymoon period of less than a week. And then came the arrests.

I cannot speak to an active police inquiry, but it's fair to

say the impact of all of this has been transcendent. Everybody's talking about it.

It is said that when you are elected President of the United States you are immediately told the secrets of Area 51 and the crashed UFOs.

Whereas if you become the leader of the SNP, you are immediately told the secrets of an unused high-end campervan parked in a Dunfermline driveway.

Whilst this is steeped in both intrigue and schadenfreude, it's a distraction that the people of Scotland just don't need.

Nicola Sturgeon's reputation is now being debated like never before, but she once declared that she wanted to be judged on her record on education.

It took six years to persuade the nationalists to adopt the pupil premium introduced by Liberal Democrats in England and Wales.

It took six years to finally persuade the nationalists. Now we have new evidence of how the Scottish Government have let that slide ever since.

Analysis I'm publishing today shows how the value of the pupil premium has been eroded by more than £200 in real terms for every single Scottish child from a poorer background.

That's money that could have been spent on breakfast clubs.

On dedicated teachers and support staff.

On activities that inspire and capture the imagination.

It is a £200 stealth cut. They are pulling up the ladder from the poorest children in Scotland. Shame on them.

If the SNP won't address it in the coming budget negotiations,

then they should get out the way for someone who will.

Conference, this is a time of great change and great challenge:

- Record NHS waiting lists
- The cost of living crisis biting
- Crumbling concrete in our schools
- And sewage dumped in our rivers

Yet we are governed by a party unequal to those challenges, wracked by scandal and blinded by division.

The SNP are haemorrhaging fair minded, reasonable voters. People are looking for a party to inspire them again.

Conference, we are the answer they've been looking for, and it's why Humza Yousaf will be the last nationalist First Minister of Scotland.

In Scotland, just like the rest of the UK, change feels so tantalising close, but still just out of reach.

It brings to mind the words of Robert Browning who wrote nearly two centuries ago.

“Glad was I when I reached the other bank, Now, now for a better country!”

And turn your eyes to the bank of the Clyde. There you will find two symbols of nationalist incompetence.

I'm talking about passenger ferries, built for the government, at their publicly-owned shipyard.

In 2017, Nicola Sturgeon attended the official launch ceremony. “May god bless her and all who sail in her”, she said. 3 cheers. High-vis and hard hats. School children waving

the saltires they had been given. As the ferry slipped into the Clyde.

But every last bit of it was fake.

The windows were painted on.

The wrong bow.

Fake funnels. Fake engines.

It's enough to make Kim Jong Un blush.

A full six years later, and guess where those ferries are now.

Still in that very same shipyard.

Costs tripled.

Cheaper to start again.

In fact, the only thing to arrive on time are the bosses' bonuses.

And the worst part of it all? The human cost beneath it.

The islanders left with broken ferries, their businesses threatened, shelves emptied and hospital appointments missed.

The good workers of a proud shipbuilding industry betrayed, their reputation trashed by government mismanagement.

Rust covered those ferries, just as decay enveloped the SNP.

And Conference, it speaks to the rot at the heart of Scottish politics that not one nationalist minister has had the decency to resign over a scandal that can be seen from space.

Conference, islanders deserve compensation, but on top of that I want to tell you about the liberal vision for connecting these communities.

And for this, we are taking inspiration from even further north. We are looking to the Faroe Islands.

They've connected their island communities with bridges and short tunnels. It has been transformational.

18 islands and 90% of their population protected from bad weather and breakdowns.

They've built the world's first undersea roundabout.

That's the kind of innovation that Scotland's ferry-dependent communities desperately need.

I'm talking about the village of Corran in the shadow of Ben Nevis, where the ferry crossing is the length of an athletics track but constantly out of order, forcing a 40-mile detour and the closure of businesses.

I'm talking about Unst, the northernmost northern isle of Shetland. It's as far as it is possible to be from the sands of this south coast.

Perched atop cliffs where the Atlantic crashes into the North Sea, they are actually building a spaceport. It will launch satellites into orbit. It would be so much easier to establish that new industry if they weren't entirely dependent on sea crossings.

Connecting these communities should matter to all of us. It's in the national interest.

That's why Alistair Carmichael and Beatrice Wishart are doing a power of work in both Parliaments to take this forward.

And for communities like Corran, councillor Angus MacDonald is leading with solutions on Highland Council.

And can I say, won't it be amazing when Angus brings Charles Kennedy's seat back into the Lib Dem fold at the next General

Election.

Conference, whether it's in our island communities or our Scottish inner cities everyone deserves the chance to get on in life.

They deserve a fair deal.

People are working their socks off, playing by the rules, but finding it harder and harder to make ends meet.

Conference, the Tories are laughing at them, they crashed the economy and are lurching from outrage to outrage.

But the Tories aren't the only ones making things harder.

Four days ago, the SNP/Green Government closed the consultation on council tax.

They are plotting a wave of increases to a tax they claim to hate amidst the worst cost of living crisis since the end of rationing.

1 in 4 households in Scotland would pay up to £835 more each year.

And they will be paying more for less. Because it won't offset the systematic underfunding of local government. You can see that already in school class sizes and the cavernous potholes in our roads.

What makes it even more galling?

The SNP have been promising to scrap the Council Tax since 2007. Nicola Sturgeon said she would 'shout it from the rooftops'.

The nationalists have gone from abolishing it, to freezing it, to plotting the biggest hike in it ever.

So my message to the First Minister is this.

Humza Yousaf,

Back our power surge for councils instead.

End the underfunding of local government once and for all.

And give the council tax to the busiest member of your Cabinet – the ever-reliable, well-worn, SNP shredder.

Scotland deserves better than a government unequal to the challenges of our time.

We face big international problems, that demand collaborative international solutions.

And I want to tell you why I find nationalism to be the polar opposite of liberalism.

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.

Simplistic populist solutions to complex problems.

So it was for Brexit, so it would be for Scottish independence.

Conference, these islands and our world face colossal, existential threats:

Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Pandemics that don't respect borders.

Global boiling.

They will not be bounded by the nearest hill, they do not end at river's shore, and conference we all know that the answer to none of them can be found in a border or a flag.

Conference, we come together in halls like these to build our vision for a liberal society. North of the border, that vision is a liberal Scotland proud in its membership of a reformed and federal United Kingdom, at the very heart of Europe.

For so long, that has seemed beyond our grasp. We need it now more than ever.

And the sands of politics are moving in big and unpredictable ways.

The promise of a new enlightenment lies ahead – and we are here for it.

A spirit of reform is gripping these islands – and we are shaping it.

Change is coming – and we will be part of it.

Conference, that other bank may finally be in sight, we only need to reach for it.

Now, for a better country.



Alex Cole Hamilton speaking at a meeting called about the Low Traffic Neighbourhood measures in Corstorphine in St Margaret's Park © 2023 Martin McAdam