

Alex Cole Hamilton addresses Liberal Democrat conference

Alex Cole Hamilton, leader of the Scottish Liberal Democrats, addressed the Liberal Democrat conference in Brighton on Tuesday reminding the party of their successes this year.

Mr Cole Hamilton said: "Conference, there was a time when I would set my alarm for 5am. It was the winter of 2014. The strain of coalition had seen off so many of our activists that each morning I would need to get three bundles of leaflets out before I packed my kids off to school.

The cold of it, the grind of it. The frosted gates, and the restless dogs.

To go out each morning in the weeks it took us to deliver the constituency and all the while have that sinking feeling that we were going to lose.

Delivering those leaflets in the cold and in the dark, brought to mind the words of Rudyard Kipling penned over a century ago.

"to watch the things you gave your life to, broken, and stoop and build' them up with worn-out tools".

Conference, the night of the 7th May 2015 was the worst in our party's history. We lost most of our MPs and the staff who supported them.

But as bad as that night was, it was eclipsed just a few weeks later by the loss of Charles Kennedy.

Charles was my mentor and he was my friend.

He always listened to the evidence, made arguments based on reason, paid heed to those with whom he disagreed, and responded with respect.

His passing left a hole in the firmament of British politics and a yawning gulf in our party.

So fast forward, to that glorious July morning this summer, and I'm sitting on the BBC sofa as Scottish leader on the finest night in our party's history.

And then I get a text. The last seat to declare will come in for us.

Conference, it felt like poetry, that the final act of this General Election should see Charles Kennedy's seat returned to the Liberal Democrat fold.

It means that Liberal Democrats now, once again represent both ends of the iconic and spectacular West Highland Way. From Fort William to Milngavie, from Angus MacDonald MP to Susan Murray MP, we are taking down the acid yellow wall of the SNP.

They now join Alistair Carmichael and Christine Jardine, both winning over 50% in their seats.

There were 5-figure majorities for the mighty Jamie Stone in the Far North and Wendy Chamberlain in Fife – the award-winning Wendy Chamberlain, recognised at the recent Holyrood Scottish Political Awards as the Best Scot at Westminster.

And what a wonderful four days we've had – basking in the warm Brighton sunshine, and in the afterglow of that General Election.

72 Lib Dem MPs, amazing, the best result for Liberals in Britain in more than a hundred years. And what about our Ed Davey eh?

- falling off a paddle board,
- learning circus skills with my daughter Darcy and me,
- the water slides and the teacup rides,

It's a hard job, but someone's got to do it,

In Scotland we call this style of campaigning the 'Willie Rennie method'.

When he was our Scottish Leader, stunts and cheerful seriousness were Willie's trademark.

But you know what they say about working with animals. Once at a community farm, unbeknown to Willie during a TV interview, over his shoulder a pair of amorous pigs were...visibly...embracing...

That photo op had international cut through.

Conference, Willie Rennie learned to walk, so that Ed Davey could fly.

And fly he did! Ed - you have taken our party to new heights, getting us the cut through we needed to be heard.

And by showing us your life and values as a carer for your family, you rightly earned a place in the hearts of a watching nation. Thank you Ed.

Conference, our success was not confined to England.

I promised you that there would be more liberals than nationalists in this new Parliament.

I said that together we would defeat the SNP and become the

third largest party; that liberal voices would once again be heard at the very front of the House of Commons.

Well conference, we did that and then some. We've tripled our number of Scottish MPs. We beat the Conservatives into fourth place.

And when viewed from space we now represent more territorial land mass than the even Scottish Labour Party. It's enough to make you pine for the feudal system. Land reform jokes – niche.

Conference, I was so proud to set out our liberal vision for Scotland in this campaign.

- To fix our health service, with fast access to GPs, dentists and world-class mental health services.
- To lift up Scottish education and fight for our carers.
- To get our economy growing.
- To put a stop to Scotland's government-owned water company dumping sewage in our rivers.

Conference, it's the reason so many people switched their vote to us.

And to those of you who did so, perhaps for the first time, or if you've come back to us, I say this. We will not let you down. We will repay your trust in full.

Conference, ten years ago tomorrow, the Scottish people voted to stay in our family of nations. But for the past decade the Scottish National Party has picked at the scab of their defeat.

Since that vote, our democracy has been stifled.

There has been a muscle memory to our politics, where each election has simply boiled down to people casting their vote

as a means of forcing a second referendum or preventing one.

It has been the sum total of public debate. That dynamic has finally fallen away. It was so liberating to be fighting this General Election based on who we are, instead of who we are not. For the first time in so long, issues that mattered to the people held sway in the campaign with the constitution barely a footnote, and I was glad of it.

For once we could lay out a liberal vision for Scotland that didn't have to be wrapped in a flag.

Conference, at the next Scottish Parliament election there will be 16-year-olds casting their ballots for the first time who have only ever known SNP rule.

Only ever known the grievance, the division, the political self-interest.

Yet all the while our schools have slipped down the international rankings.

Climate targets have been missed.

The waits for mental health treatment feel like a lifetime.

No wonder people feel like everything is broken...

In power for too long. Breaking rules. Taking people for granted. Sound familiar?

What was true for the Conservative Government at this last election is equally true of the SNP Government in Scotland for the next.

And conference they deserve the same fate. It's time we were rid of them.

Conference, Scottish ministerial disinterest has harmed every part of Scotland, but that is particularly true for our rural communities.

We will fight to get those areas the fair deal they deserve.

They are engines of the Scottish economy, for farming, forestry, food and drink, and so much more.

So why are they always stuck at the back of the queue?

30 years to make the deadly A9 safer between Perth and Inverness.

Broadband speeds that belong in the 1990s.

Mothers in labour travelling 100 miles to hospital.

And the worst fuel poverty anywhere in the United Kingdom.

That's not a fair deal. Not when you live in a part of the country that is the powerhouse for a renewables revolution that will move us to net zero and guarantee energy security.

To be shivering in the shadow of wind turbines, unable to heat your home. That's not a fair deal.

It's why the community benefit rules need to be modernised. It's only right that local people feel the full benefit too.

And I'm not talking about planters for the high street or a minor refurbishment to the village hall.

Because it's time to reimagine community benefit. I'm talking about:

- Local energy bill discount schemes
- Affordable housing
- New GP surgeries
- Training to upskill local workers and the promise of good jobs

Of course, we need the right developments in the right places,

but I say the bounty of the renewables revolution must flow through those communities.

There's an opportunity to build a rich legacy, but the SNP are already showing they can't be trusted with that.

Just three years ago the Scottish Government auctioned our prime seabed to energy companies who will build offshore windfarms upon it.

Alex Salmond, Nicola Sturgeon and John Swinney, all made a name for themselves by fighting Margaret Thatcher.

Chief among those criticisms was her spending oil and gas revenues – of failing to create a sovereign wealth fund for the oil beneath the Scottish seabed.

Indeed the very foundations of the modern SNP are built upon the idea that this revenue should have been invested and earmarked for Scotland for the long-term, like Norway did. "It's Scotland's oil" they said.

Only now they've gone and done exactly the same thing.

They sold the seabed in one go, and the money will soon be gone.

Well conference, it's Scotland's wind and the SNP have blown it.

Conference, our Scottish Parliament should be a place where the priorities of the people always come first.

It's celebrating turning 25 years old.

Just remember what liberals have delivered for Scotland.

Free personal care, eye tests, dental checks, bus passes and the smoking ban. That was us.

Freedom of information and fair votes for local government.

That was us too.

And I want to tell you about what I believe needs to happen next.

My father-in-law slipped away from us six years ago, on a day not unlike this one.

He succumbed to a kind of liver cancer that was mercifully painless and took him very swiftly after diagnosis. We'd managed to get him home from hospital and when it was clear the end was coming, Gill and her siblings moved back into the house to support their parents through the final week of his life.

I would go out there whenever I could, it wasn't a chore, it was lovely. They had created a bubble around him filled with love and light and laughter. We took turns to spend precious time with him. There was such unexpected joy in those days and then one morning he was gone. It was a very gentle passing.

If I could choose the manner of my own death, it would certainly be that.

But we don't get to choose. All too many people are denied a good death and depart this world in pain and in distress.

Endings matter, in stories and in life, and I want to know that if I am dying in agony, beyond the reach of palliative care or I know that moment is coming, then I'll have the right to say 'this far and no further' and leave this world in dignity.

We have human rights designed to protect and safeguard every aspect of our life, save one and that is our departure from it. That's why I support the Assisted Dying for Terminally ill Adults Bill currently before the Scottish Parliament.

I am proud that there is a Liberal Democrat at the helm of this legislation. Our MSP Liam McArthur was trusted by

campaigners to get this right and achieve this change. It will be a free vote. No Scottish Liberal Democrat MSP will be asked to act against their conscience.

I know that not everyone in this hall will be persuaded. I understand that – but our plurality as a movement sets us apart from all other parties.

We come together at conferences like these to discuss big and sometimes divisive issues, but always in a friendly and constructive way. Friends, we may have one election in the rear-view mirror, but in Scotland we are fast accelerating towards another. It might even happen this coming spring.

The upcoming Holyrood elections may be the most consequential in the history of devolution.

Because in Scotland, things are changing.

We can close the book on this divisive period in our politics.

We've won more Liberal Democrat MPs. We must now focus on winning more Liberal Democrat Members of the Scottish Parliament and lifting our vote in every corner of the country.

We can achieve that – but Conference, we will need your help.

We have fought tooth and nail to keep that liberal flame alive. Friends, we finally have the opportunity to fan those flames into a roaring furnace.

Carloads and trainloads of us travelled south to the by-election victories that set us on our way for all that we achieved this summer.

Well conference, it will soon be time for you to travel north.

So come help us. Help us to deliver the selfless Lib Dem representation everyone in Scotland needs.

Because that is what we're all about. It's about helping your neighbours. It's about showing up with a sturdy pair of trainers and a cake tin ready to knock doors.

It's about standing shoulder-to-shoulder and fighting for the values and the liberal future we all believe in.

Conference, I look around this hall and I see such evidence of the resilience of this party.

Of members and activists who together have been through the fire of electoral annihilation, who have completed the hard yards of renewal and who have emerged, blinking into the light of a new politics.

I am so proud to know you and to have walked that path with you.

With worn out tools we have stooped to build up the broken thing we gave our lives to, but that work is not complete.

The next stop on that journey of Liberal revival is Scotland."



Alex Cole Hamilton MSP leader of the Scottish Liberal Democrats at their Conference held at the Royal College of Physicians

PHOTO Alan Simpson