

Leadership

Interview with Tim Farron MP on his period as Leader of the Liberal Democrats, from 2015 to 2017

Tim Farron as



Farron launches the Liberal Democrat election manifesto, 17 May 2017

TIM FARRON, Liberal Democrat MP for Westmorland and Lonsdale since 2005, was elected as the fifth leader of the Liberal Democrats in July 2015. In June 2016, after the referendum on Britain's membership of the EU, he was quick to call for a further referendum on the final deal following the negotiations, and committed the Liberal Democrats to argue for the UK to remain within the EU. His campaign in the 2017 general election, however, was dogged by repeated questions over his attitude, as a practising Christian, to gay sex. On 14 June 2017, six days after the election, he announced his intention to resign the leadership, and formally stood down when his successor was elected a month later. In June this year, the *Journal of Liberal History* interviewed him about his period as leader.

JLH: When did you decide that you first wanted to stand for the leadership?

TF: I think it only really occurred to me that I might in the weeks following the general election in 2010, when a number of younger MPs who were not in government encouraged me to run for deputy leader. Although Simon Hughes was successful then, I guess it set a number of us thinking about what might happen next.

I think it really began during the time I was president of the party [2011–15]. I am always an optimistic and positive person, but nevertheless you couldn't really look at how our poll rating was going, our standing in by-elections, local elections and the devolved parliaments and assemblies ... It looked to me like the general election in what turned out to be 2015 was going to do us a lot of damage. I don't think I ever predicted just eight seats, but about twelve months before the election I did predict about thirteen or fourteen. I feared for that. I thought it would be awful for the party and therefore for the country.

Party Leader

A lot of my heroes are the ‘come back from the dead’ type of people: Paddy Ashdown, Neva Orrell (my great mentor from Leyland, who lost her ward four times and got it back four times), Jo Grimond, David Steel after the Thorpe scandal – there’s something really joyful about being part of a comeback. Obviously I wanted us to recover, so I thought: ‘Well, there’s lots of things that I wouldn’t be good at, but leading and building a campaigning insurgency was something I would be.’ So I had no particular thought that ‘I want it now’ or ‘I want it at this particular point’, I just thought that there was a job needing to be done and I thought I could do it.

JLH: You were president of the party from 2011 to 2015. Was that a useful preparation to be leader?

TF: Yes, in terms of working out the relationship with headquarters and with the party in the country, with the campaigners – getting to know them and to understand some of the specific issues around particular constituencies and council areas. It was great for building relationships.

I think when you join the party at 16, you’ve been to nearly every conference since then, been to loads of by-elections, you know a lot of people and you have a deep relationship with people in the party. It wasn’t that I needed any more of that, but being president gave me links to the professional structure of the party. It helped me to understand – and, forgive me, to be intolerant of – some of the party structures and the difficulties in dealing with things, particularly disciplinary issues. It reminded me that a lot of power is not formal, it is informal; and if you want to make stuff happen, you have to find a way to make it happen, even if the rules don’t formally give you permission.

I also had to be thinking on my feet all the time. For all that people think of me as a sceptic about the coalition, I voted for it; I voted for 99 per cent of the things that were put to me and I

spent a vast amount of my time trying to articulate in understandable language what we were doing – to our own people as well as to people out there – and to argue the Liberal Democrats’ cause as opposed to the coalition’s message. That was a valuable experience in terms of reacting to other people’s decisions and trying to communicate them in ways that reassured, maybe even inspired, the members and gave us some chance of getting a distinct message across around the country.

JLH: What do you think the party did wrong in coalition? What do you think the Liberal Democrats should have done differently?

TF: I voted for coalition, and I still think that was probably the right thing to do by the country. But I think we were too afraid of our own shadow – we were scared of causing an early election, that’s why we went for coalition rather than something else. We forgot, or weren’t aware, how much more terrified of an early election David Cameron and George Osborne were. Bear in mind that they were supposed to be the Blair/Brown partnership who would deliver a majority for the Tory party, and they snatched defeat from the jaws of victory – largely because Nick played a blinder, but also because they were complacent. The Liberal Democrats going into coalition with the Tories saved Cameron’s skin in many ways. If the coalition had not been formed, an early election may have happened, following a period of minority Tory government, and I bet you Cameron wouldn’t have been leader – and they knew that. We held much more power over them than we realised.

We spent the first two years – and especially the first six months – behaving like if anybody breathed the word ‘dissent’, somehow the coalition would crack and everything would be all over. That was always rubbish, and we should have known that it was rubbish. The mood music at the beginning was dreadful. We should

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have learned lessons from Scotland [the Labour – Liberal Democrat coalitions of 1999–2007], where we never looked like we were the same beast as the Labour Party. It was very clear that we dragged two things out of Labour. Every time something went wrong north of the border, between 1999 and 2007 everybody would go: ‘Ah, yes. But they got us the fees [the abolition of tuition fees] and free personal care for the elderly.’ We had none of that. We didn’t think about the PR, apart from thinking that if we didn’t look like two peas in a pod then somehow the world would end. But even so, as the summer recess began in 2010, we were still on 17 per cent; it was [tuition] fees that killed us. It’s all very well saying, ‘Oh, we got the four things on the front page of the manifesto into the coalition agreement.’ We have to remember not just what *we* thought we offered the electorate, but what *they* thought we were offering.

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s we had managed to build – amazingly, actually, and Paddy Ashdown, Charles Kennedy and Nick need to take huge credit for this – a core vote, based upon our position on Iraq and tuition fees and one or two other things. But because the leadership thought that tuition fees was a commitment we shouldn’t have made, nobody died in the ditch – or even tried to put up any kind of fight – for it in the coalition negotiations.

It was always obvious that we would take some kind of hit for going into coalition with the Tories – after all, the Lib–Lab Pact happened for eighteen months when I was 7 and 8 years of age and it was still a reason people cited at me for not voting Lib Dem in 2010. So full-blown coalition with the arch-enemy is likely to do you damage whatever you do with them. However, I think that tuition fees was the difference between thirty MPs and eight.

The other thing, of course, was buying into austerity too comprehensively. I could understand turning the tap down on revenue spending, but to cut off capital spending right at the beginning, I thought that was wrong in terms of the impact on society, and politically it made it look like we’d changed sides. And that, if I’m honest with you, that’s what motivated me to run for president more than anything else. I just thought: ‘We have to have a voice that sounds like us.’

JLH: Looking further back, you were also the Liberal Democrat equivalent of a Parliamentary Private Secretary (PPS) to Menzies Campbell during his time as leader. Was that useful preparation for your leadership?

TF: Yes it was. I have always massively admired Menzies Campbell, and I admired him all the more having been close to him as leader; he was an incredibly decent man who had a really

tough and torrid time, utterly unjustifiably, during his period as leader.

He resigned as leader about a week or two after Gordon Brown bottled calling an election in 2007. I remember coming down to London that Monday evening, and Daisy McAndrew from ITV running down the corridor saying: ‘Is it true Menzies’ resigning?’, and I said, ‘I’m his PPS – I think I’d know!’ But I didn’t know, as half an hour later he resigned and I got a text from Archy Kirkwood telling me so. I remember sitting in the Members’ Tea Room feeling slightly bewildered, and in comes Vince Cable in his raincoat looking even more bewildered, and said, ‘I think I’m leader. I think I’ll need a PPS, won’t I? Do you fancy doing it for me?’ So I became the acting PPS to the acting leader, which is about as low as you can get and still be on the ladder.

The contrast in leadership styles was really interesting to see at close hand. Menzies went about it thoroughly professionally, spending two or three hours preparing for Prime Minister’s Questions every Wednesday. Vince was just a one-man band, coming in at 11 o’clock [PM’s Questions is at 12 noon] having had a long soak in the bath where he had dreamt up a question that he ran past me.

I also became aware of how the leader’s office and the party machinery – the party’s HQ – are two separate power bases. Chris Rennard was still Chief Executive then, and I saw a clear tension there, which I believed was wrong, a waste of energy. So I made a virtue out of a necessity when I became leader, which was to move the leader’s office to HQ. You move to HQ and you make everybody part of the leader’s team; I didn’t make it some exclusive club where I was up against the Chief Executive. I’d spend time just walking around talking to people in HQ, finding out who they were and what they were doing. I think it was motivating to people to feel that they were part of the leader’s team, not just stuck ten minutes away from it. I also think Tim Gordon [Liberal Democrat Chief Executive 2012–17] and I worked really well together,

JLH: Did you want to take the party in any kind of different direction, politically?

TF: I eschew all the left–right talk, but I felt that the party had – not by design but by drift, by being in coalition with the Conservatives, and through the general move to a post-Thatcher space where market economics are taken as the norm and intervention is seen as peculiar – I thought that the centre of gravity of the party had moved a little bit too far to the right for my liking. I am both a liberal and a social democrat, and I thought that we were pretty good on the liberal side but that we had

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just lost touch with the social democrat side a bit. So, yes, without wanting to do anything massively dramatic, I wanted us to be a party that thinks that government can be part of the solution rather than part of the problem.

JLH: So more at the social liberal end of the spectrum?

TF: I don't think being a social liberal is at odds with being an economic liberal. But an ambitious liberal government that creates more freedom via a degree of intervention is thoroughly consistent with liberal philosophy and liberal history and tradition. In reality, small government actually means weak citizens. There is a difference between big in-your-face government stamping all over your civil liberties and government that is active in creating strong public services and which redistributes.

I have always thought that the Adam Smith notion of the invisible hand in the marketplace is just not true. There is an invisible force in the marketplace and it is gravity – more comes to those with plenty to start off with – and so a real liberal wants to break that up, referee it, redistribute it. I thought the party needed to move a little bit more in that direction. I also thought that most of the members probably thought that too, and would feel more comfortable in that kind of party.

JLH: So basically your aims were to rescue the party from catastrophe and move it in a more social-liberal, leftward direction. To what extent do you think you achieved either of those things?

TF: Well I think the former, we've 100,000 members and we're moving forward. The day after I became leader, I think *The Times* declared that: 'The party that began with Gladstone will end with Farron'. We must never forget that that was absolutely a possibility, it might have happened.

We stabilised the party, found a cause, doubled in size. We aimed to help members pick a ward and win it, to give people the sense that look, you may have no MP or councillors

Farron and supporters on the march for Europe, London, 2 July 2016

whatsoever, but you can win somewhere – giving people a bit of self-belief, making campaigning a thing that wasn't an afterthought to a very Westminster-focused leadership but the life and soul of someone who was a born campaigner himself. I think we achieved that.

In terms of a leftward shift, we didn't really have much time. But I fought very hard, and successfully in the end, for us to commit to the additional penny on income tax for the NHS. If we had had more time, we'd have developed that more. Simply by virtue of being outside coalition and in opposition to the Conservatives, that move started by itself, without too much help from me.

JLH: Most leaders, at some time or another, have had problems with their parliamentary party. Did that happen to you as well?

TF: The main issue was when we took the decision to take an unashamedly pro-European position in the early hours following the Brexit referendum, including arguing for a referendum on the final deal – which not all of my colleagues agreed with. It was a massive political gamble. You could argue it nearly cost me my seat, because I think there was a large percentage of people who, however they'd voted, thought, 'Oh, enough whining already.' But I'd also argue that it's what saved the party – it's what doubled us in size, it's what won us Richmond Park [by-election in 2016], and it's what gave us any kind of clear message. The main enemy that we were fighting, post-2015, was irrelevance. Our biggest challenge in the 2017 election, and even now, probably, is a result of that election: we got so battered in 2015 that it doesn't matter how right you are – if you are not big enough to be credible, it becomes almost pointless. Much as I disagree with Labour's humming and hawing over Europe, when you're on 40 per cent you can afford nuance; when you're on 8 per cent, you can't.

We planned this – myself, Tim Gordon, my own staff, Alistair Carmichael [Chief Whip in

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the Commons], Dick Newby [then Chief Whip in the Lords] – about a week or two before referendum day. I did something David Cameron never did – I planned for what happens if you lose. We spent two or three hours discussing it, and it became very clear that we had to come out and be unashamedly pro-Europe, (a) because we believed it and (b) because we were going to bleed into complete irrelevance if we didn't. We chose to be 'Marmite'; and the thing about Marmite is that some people love it, and some people really hate it. And some of my colleagues really hated it.

JLH: What are you most proud of achieving in your time as leader?

TF: Probably the fact that the party membership is the biggest that it has ever been. And that wasn't an accident. People don't join dying parties, and we were a dying party. So I think that is probably it – that we've grown and survived. It would have been nice to have gone on to further steps, but the first was live and grow, and we did more than that. Every party leader has promised that they would double the party's membership, or add an extra 40,000, or something like that. Well, I did that; nobody else did – helped by calamitous circumstances; but you don't automatically pick up 50,000 members unless you make key choices, which we did.

JLH: What did you find most challenging?

TF: Being a constituency MP. I won my seat in a very peculiar, very personal way – even by Lib Dem standards! I had a wonderful team, I'm not saying it was only down to me; but I loved Westmorland and Lonsdale to death, and I had a level of presence in my community that other people, even my great colleagues, didn't have. I found that maintaining that presence, and combining it with being a dad and a husband, really hard. The way I dealt with it was just by working stupidly hard. I would be up north an awful lot, but every second would be diarised. I think in terms of the balance of life, that was the real challenge.

JLH: Is that why your majority fell in 2017?

TF: I think so, partly. I also think that there was a perception that: 'Oh, he's the leader now. He's left us.' Which was never true, but perceptions are everything. And I also think, to put it bluntly, the position that we took on Brexit was always going to cut down the middle. On top of that was the level of Tory spending. I think I am right in saying that in 2017 Westmorland and Lonsdale Tories held the record for the largest amount of money spent in one constituency without winning. I guess they thought it was worth the effort of chucking the kitchen

sink at us to decapitate the Lib Dem leader. But the Brexit position was the key thing that gave them the way in.

JLH: What were you most disappointed by in your time as leader?

TF: That I didn't get to complete all the projects we had started. I'm not somebody who thought: 'Oh, I must do this for ten years.' But there is a load more that I know I could have done, in terms of building our brand. The next project would have been building a well-funded centre, linked to the party, which would have been about wooing opinion-formers in society, in big business, in the media; having a credible economic plan that made it very clear that there was something other than mad English nationalism and Trotskyism on the agenda.

I thought credibility was key. Some of this is about being in the media, or winning elections, but some of it is about gaining credibility with people who have got the resources to help you. We were very close to that, and that would have been a big, seven-figure project that would have brought some very big people onside, some people from outside the party. That was on the cusp of happening when the election was called. I would have liked to have seen that project completed.

JLH: Do you think the party could have fought the 2017 election campaign better?

TF: In many ways we fought it well: I think we had a national message that gave us distinctiveness, though clearly it was a disadvantage in many of the areas where we had been strong beforehand. And there were some areas where it could have worked more in our favour. So perhaps we should have been scoping out other target seats, as we did in places like St Albans. But that would have meant dropping seats where we had been only a few hundred or thousand behind in 2015.

It helped that we had prepared for the snap election in autumn 2016 that didn't happen; we had the manifesto pretty much in the bag. I think the thing that really would have helped us in the 2017 election was not being so badly hammered in 2015 – that was 95 per cent of our problem.

JLH: Perhaps it didn't help that the election never got into the details of Brexit?

TF: The election was about Brexit, in the sense that people who had voted Leave had no sympathy with people who were still whining about Europe, and people who had voted Remain felt it wasn't cricket to whine about Europe. So, yes, if the election had been now

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[June 2018], or in the autumn, then it might have been a very different kettle of fish.

In the end, it became about leadership. I guess our problem – my problem – was that I was the first Liberal or Lib Dem leader not even to be the leader of the third party. Our ability to get our message across was really limited, and the election became more obviously Labour *v.* Tory.

After the local elections it looked like Theresa May had played a master stroke; I thought she was going to win by 100 plus. It was really only as we got into the middle of May that I began to think, with the dementia tax and things like that, that she hadn't planned it; she was making schoolboy errors. But the combination of that very commanding result for the Tories in the local elections and us not performing – our vote went up by 7 per cent, but the Tory vote went up by so much more because of the UKIP collapse – and the effect of the 'strong and stable' message, which was working in the first week of May, meant that we were overcome. We didn't get the bounce we thought we were going to get from the locals.

And, perversely, because it looked like Labour were a million miles from power, there wasn't really any need to vote for Theresa May to keep out that dangerous loony Corbyn. Also, the messaging the Tories used about Corbyn, that they'd always assumed from day one would work, didn't. He's a unilateralist, he may have been sympathetic to the Soviet Union, he'd been with the IRA, all these kinds of things – you've got to be over 40 to even know about that stuff. And even if you do know about it, their message sounded like your grumpy old granddad telling you what you shouldn't do – which, obviously, you did. It wasn't just young people who thought, 'Oh, he's harmless and she's going to win anyway'; I think that was felt across the country.

In many ways, the major problem with the Tory campaign, apart from their lack of preparation, was that it was too long a campaign. She should have looked at the local elections and gone the week after for a three or four-week campaign instead.

JLH: Do you think the Lib Dems would have done better in the 2017 local elections if the general election hadn't been called by then?

TF: I am 100 per cent certain. I also think that there was a fighting chance we'd have won the Manchester Gorton by-election. Our canvassing in Gorton was as good at that stage as it had been in Richmond at the same point. Poor Jackie Piercy – she could have been our tenth MP.

I also think that Labour were going to get hammered in those local elections. People like

Owen Jones were beginning to be critical of Corbyn at that point because he was performing so poorly, and they had lost the Copeland bye-election [in February 2017]. I think Theresa May perhaps thought, 'This is your moment. If you are not careful, Corbyn will be sacked by the summer. You've got to grab your moment to fight him.' I'm certain we would have made quite big gains, probably into three figures in the locals, certainly above fifty, if we'd not had the general election called beforehand.

JLH: When did you decide to resign the leadership?

TF: After the first week or two of the campaign, when all I was getting were questions which related to my faith, I thought that this was not sustainable; it wasn't fair on the party. But I then pigeonholed that and didn't really tell anybody. Once the election result was announced, I certainly had no immediate intention of resigning, not least because we'd done all right. If you compare our result to the expectations, after Labour we did the next best. The Tories did worse than the expectations; UKIP did a lot worse; the Greens didn't achieve anything; the SNP went backwards; Labour did much better than expected; we made four gains [net] and were within a total of 400 votes of another four. It wasn't a nine out of ten result for us, but it was certainly a seven out of ten.

So I didn't even countenance stepping down in the day or two following the election, not least because I didn't want the message to be that we hadn't done so well. But I reached the conclusion that if all I was going to do was get these questions about my faith, I would either have to compromise my faith in a way which wouldn't be right, just to make them all go away, or I would – to put it bluntly – be a bad leader. I was the main mouthpiece for the party, and if all they were asking me was stuff to do with my faith, then our message wasn't going to be heard. So I either compromised my faith or, frankly, did the party a disservice; but I didn't want to do either of those things, really.

I remember probably about a week after the election, I had just been sworn in as an MP again, I'd had a really nice conversation with Tim Gordon about what we were going to do next and I thought: 'This is not fair. If I'm thinking like this, then I ought to go now rather than leave it to the Queen's Speech, or the summer', which I had been thinking of. There was a balanced Parliament, there could have been another election in October. So I made the judgement the following day that it was best to do it straight away. I was in the queue to swear in again, talking to lots of Labour MPs with swollen majorities who were surprised to be back at all, and I just thought: 'I

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need to do this now.' It was sad, but I felt it was the right thing.

JLH: It seemed very sudden, because you'd just called an election for deputy leader, and then you announced your resignation on the day after the Grenfell fire disaster. So it wasn't ideal, was it?

TF: It wasn't. But in the end I just took the view that leaving it over another weekend would just get people talking, and so I thought I needed to do it then. It was not ideal timing, but it never is; if I'd left it another day or two it might have got out of hand.

JLH: There were stories about deputations of peers and others coming to see you to ask you to step down. Did that happen?

TF: Not really. I think there were a number of people who had not approved of the position that I had taken keeping Chris Rennard out of office – which was never anything personal, I just thought it was the right thing for the party – so there was a sense in which they felt that I shouldn't continue. But I took the view that after any election there is always a bit of grumbling, and if I wanted to stay on as leader, then I would, and I would see people off – I'm good at a scrap. I had conversations with various people – I had a good conversation with Dick Newby [then Leader of the Liberal Democrat peers] and I had a really lovely chat with Jo Swinson, who urged me to continue and for which I was very grateful – but, in the end it was my decision.

I also thought that if there did end up being tittle tattle in the days ahead, then it would look like I was reacting to that. I didn't want to do that, I wanted to make sure that people were very clear that: a) we'd had a good election result and we should be pleased with ourselves; and b) me stepping down was for the reasons that I gave, which it really was. In this world, in this business, my experience tells me if you leave something twenty-four hours, you've lost control of it.

JLH: Did Brian Paddick's resignation as Home Affairs spokesman have any impact?

TF: No, not at all. I had a lovely chat with him, actually. I've always thought he has been one of the most understanding people and got how my head worked better than most people. He was clear that he was not going to continue; but I still have a very good relationship with Brian and he is a lovely man and a very kind man.

JLH: Do you think you could have handled the questions about your faith better during the campaign?

TF: The tricky thing is, when you are asked a question about anything about *sin* ... what

Christians mean by *sin* is 100 per cent different to what the rest of the world thinks. The only person whose '*sins*' I am responsible for is me; and the commandment I find easiest to abide by is to not judge others. But how can you answer a question asked in one language from another language? Maybe it would have been better to say: 'This is a completely different linguistic framework you are using and whatever I say, whichever answer I give you, it will be understood completely wrongly and therefore we are just not going there.' But could I have held the line? It is amazing how David Cameron managed to not talk about things he may nor may not have done at university during all the time he was prime minister and leader. Would I have been capable of having that discipline, and would they have left me alone? I don't know. I do think that undoubtedly I bear responsibility for that. But I also think the tricky thing is – and this is why the media loved picking at this – was that you are talking about two different languages.

JLH: Speaking as an atheist, I think of sin as something that's bad and should be stopped, so if someone describes something as sinful it means that they think it should not happen.

TF: That's exactly what I'm getting at. That is how it is seen in the non-Christian world, and, indeed, to some extent even by some people who profess a faith. Whereas to us it talks about our relationship with God – it is very specific, and specific to us, and carries a totally different meaning. And so it just gets heard wrong – which is why journalists want you to talk about it.

JLH: Do you think, in an ideal world, that it would have been possible to find a way to deal with those questions? Or was it just not possible at all?

TF: Well, one of the ways I dealt with it – and it was the most successful way, I guess, but still, it wasn't right – was to say that it is a private matter; faith is private. But it isn't. You shouldn't impose your faith on other people, but nobody else leaves their world view at the door, whether it comes from a formal faith, Muslim, or Hindu, or Christian, or whether it's from reading Karl Marx or John Stuart Mill or whatever. I think that in an ideal world, in a more liberal world, then we'd accept that 'people of faith' isn't just a cultural expression. I think we tolerate faith where it's cultural, historical, or family-related – 'I'm from mid-Wales, therefore I go to the chapel', or what have you – but the minute that it practically affects your personal choices, we seem to be not OK with that. In an ideal world, we would understand that some people believe in God, and get over it.

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JLH: Were the questions about your faith a surprise?
 TF: Not entirely. I kind of knew it would come back, though everybody around me, I think, just hoped it wouldn't. Could I have prepared more? I don't know. I could have done something, I'm sure. Look, the reality is that the buck stops with me, and I could have dealt with some of those things more wisely.

JLH: Do you think it is possible for someone with strong religious views to be the leader of the Liberal Democrats?
 TF: Well, I was! I think if they can't be leader of a liberal party, then I don't know who else they could lead. The whole notion of being a liberal is to defend different world views. There's a danger in Western society that we begin to think that we all have to accept the same world view. That's dangerous; that's bordering on the authoritarian. So just as we are the party that ought to be most likely to elect a leader from any other kind of minority background, we ought to be the most likely to elect people with a firm religious background, or the opposite.

I guess part of my challenge to people of faith is that government and politics will happen whether you are involved with it or not, and growing authoritarianism across the Western world is a threat to all minority groups – to all, as Mill would have put it, eccentric lifestyles and ways of thinking, things that are off-centre and not majority pursuits. So whatever minority you belong to – if you are a person of faith, whatever faith you belong to – you should crave liberalism; we should be the party and the movement for you.

JLH: What do you think are the characteristics of an ideal Lib Dem leader?

TF: Endurance: you've got to be able to just keep going. An ability to understand that the world owes you nothing and you've got to make your own luck. I think you've got to have a good sense of humour and realise that you are the butt of people's jokes just because of who you are and the party you lead.

I think also you have to be, not a micro-manager, but you have to understand that you have to try to turn round an organisation that is small and under-funded and make it massively more than the sum of its parts; and the fuel for that is inspiration and self-belief. So your message to the party is at least as important as your message to the public, because if you can't inspire your troops, then who is going to inspire the people out there? But you also have to understand that management and structure is really important, doing things professionally in an organised way, that you need to have a plan and you need to be able to decide that you are not going to try to do everything.

JLH: Do you think that the leader needs a clear plan and a clear vision for the direction in which you want to lead the party? Or is it more about simply reacting to circumstances?

TF: I think you need to be aware that when you are the third or fourth or fifth party, you are going to make less news on your own than you would like. Our mantra was, when it came to news events of any kind on any given day: 'first, original, funny', or 'first, different, funny', and if you can't be one of those three, don't bother. So even your reactivity needs to be planned.

What did we want to achieve? We wanted to be a party that was clearly of the centre-left and that was pro-Europe. Given that we had been so badly hammered in 2015, we understood that the job was to establish credibility on a national level in two ways: being remembered for one thing – which ended up being Europe – and building up from the grassroots, which we partly did through our position on Europe; that run of local council by-elections we had [after the Brexit referendum] was the best we'd had since the early '90s.

So you needed to have a very clear vision, which was to try and pull out our distinctiveness, to not be so bogged down with our experience of government that we forgot how to be spiky, guerrilla-like and campaigning. So there was a quite clear vision of what we were trying to do: to have cut-through on domestic issues; to recognise that that was going to be hard, so we had to have a strategy for reacting; to build up at the grassroots; to re-energise the local government base and to build on it; and then to take a very spiky, Marmite-ish, and I think party-saving, position on Europe.

JLH: How would you like your time as leader to be remembered?

TF: I have often said that I don't care! I remember being here [in Parliament] in my first fortnight in 2005, and you get lost in this place, so I joined a tour for the Catholic primary school in Kendal. We got to the Peers' Lobby and I noticed Geoffrey Howe shambling in, and I was slightly starstruck – he was the Chancellor of the Exchequer when I was a kid. This eleven-year-old girl at the back could see who I was looking at, and she said, 'Who's he?' So I said, 'That's Geoffrey Howe. He brought down Margaret Thatcher', and she said, 'Who's Margaret Thatcher?' Which told me that if you seek to be remembered, it's in vain!

Insofar as it matters, I'd like to be remembered for stopping the party from evaporating, giving it a purpose and making it stand out at a point where it would have been much easier for it to have disappeared.

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