

Leadership

Interview with Vince Cable MP on his period as Leader of the Liberal Democrats

Vince Cable

RT HON SIR Vince Cable, MP for Twickenham from 1997 to 2015, and again from 2017, served as Liberal Democrat Treasury spokesperson 2003–10 and Deputy Leader of the party 2006–10. He was Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills in the Liberal Democrat – Conservative coalition government of 2010–15. He was elected Leader of the Liberal Democrats in July 2017 – unopposed, after Tim Farron’s sudden resignation after the disappointing outcome of the 2017 general election. In March 2019 he announced his decision to stand down as leader; he handed over to Jo Swinson after the leadership election two months later. In August, the *Journal of Liberal History* interviewed him about his political career and, especially, his period as leader.

JLH: Let’s start with your political beliefs. You were a member of the Liberal Club at university?

VC: As soon as I went to university, in 1962, I joined the Liberal Club. That was the era of Jo Grimond, and I was motivated by his great speech on Europe at the party conference, when he made fun of Gaitskell’s ‘thousand years of history’ speech; I was very charged up by that.¹ So I joined the Liberal Club, and I was quite active in it; I ran the Liberal Club magazine, which was called *Scaffold*. I think the first article I ever wrote was about newspaper magnates, which in view of what subsequently happened with Mr Murdoch and so on, was quite appropriate.

I became President of the Club in 1963. I followed Chris Mason,² who became active in Glasgow, and before that Alan Watson.³ When I was President of the Club – you know, you get ideas above your station – I thought it was slightly odd that we were in roughly the same terrain as the social democrats in the Labour Party; there was then a group around Dick Taverne, Shirley Williams and one or two others, called the Campaign for Democratic Socialism. So I suggested that in lieu of any action at the national level, we should merge with this group, and I tried to organise it.

I didn’t exactly carry the membership with me! The Liberal Club at that stage was dominated by

a group of radical Liberals who followed someone called Manuela Sykes, who was the candidate in Ipswich, and was of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament-supporting brand of Liberalism.⁴ The Club rejected it, the social democrats rejected it, and I was left in a kind of limbo. So I continued to the end of my term, but then dropped out, and in the general election campaign in 1964, I campaigned for [Labour leader] Harold Wilson, and in particular his candidate in York, who was a man called Alex Lyon, who subsequently became quite famous as a liberal Immigration Minister, and married Clare Short, who became Secretary of State for International Development under Tony Blair.

JLH: So you’ve been a member of the Liberal Party, then the Labour Party, then the SDP and then the Liberal Democrats. How would you say your political beliefs have changed over time?

VC: Not very much, actually, though people find that very difficult to believe. Although my labels have changed several times, both as a student and as an adult, my broad views haven’t really changed very much. In fact, the first couple of editions I did of *Scaffold*, the university magazine, were all about liberalism, and the new emerging agenda of homosexual rights, abortion – the social-liberal agenda that was then unfashionable but was becoming less so. I was liberal in that sense, but also social democratic – I rather liked the idea of redistribution; I was influenced by Anthony Crosland’s *The Future of Socialism*. So that combination of liberal and social democratic and internationalist – I was certainly engaged by the European issue at that time – that was the combination of beliefs I had then and I still have.

JLH: When you were the Liberal Democrats’ Treasury spokesman, in the lead-up to the coalition, you adopted what were generally seen as fairly right-wing, or economic-liberal, views, in party terms. But in coalition you were often perceived to be to the left of Nick Clegg and the leadership, and perhaps more social democratic, and somewhat unhappy with the direction of the coalition, at least in terms of economic policy. So would you put yourself on the left or the right of the party?

Right: Vince Cable, February 2018 (Photo: Liberal Democrats)

e as leader



Interview: Vince Cable as leader

VC: I've always been somewhat on the left of the party. The reason why I acquired a kind of *Orange Book* persona wasn't out of enthusiasm for what you might call right-wing economics.⁵ It was a reaction against what would now be called populism. There was a very strong view in the party [in the mid 2000s] that you basically tell people what they want to hear, that people can have more of everything. I reacted against that, in my brief as Treasury spokesman. I clashed with Matthew Taylor⁶ because his technique – which was heavily influenced by Chris Rennard⁷ – was to make a long list of things people might want, and promise them it. I thought this was completely bizarre and completely contrary to my economic background.

I'd always been brought up in liberal economics, genuine liberal economics – I taught economics in university in the building named after Adam Smith – mixed in with a social-democratic approach to taxation, though I was never into heavy regulation and control. The *Orange Book* was partly a reaction to the kind of populist strain in the party, combined with an element of the economic-liberal belief in free trade, and the recognition that the private sector had to have an important role in the economy. At the time it was called right-wing, but I never really recognised that language as describing my position.

What I did in the coalition – where I think I was probably on the left on almost every issue that we dealt with – was a more genuine reflection of what I believe.

JLH: What impact do you think the Orange Book had within the party?

VC: It annoyed a lot of people! I'm not quite sure how much influence it had. I was quite close to David Laws, who was the real intellectual driving force behind it.⁸ He was part of my Treasury team and we were quite close, we were good friends and we often talked to each other, so he had quite a big influence on my way of thinking about taxation policy, for example. One of the big ironies around it was that we had two possible candidates for the one big idea that would grab a bit of attention when it was launched. We went for David's idea, of switching the NHS to a social insurance system, which got David a terrible reputation in the party. The other, which was mine, was that in order to demonstrate that we were genuinely in favour of a mixed economy rather than everything being publicly owned, we should adopt the policy of bringing private capital into the Royal Mail. Most people forgot about that, but when we got into government, it was my suggestion that happened.

JLH: Do you think you've had a lasting impact on the party's economic policy? Has it gone in the direction you wanted it to?

VC: I think so, yes, mainly because a lot of the things which I believed in did find expression in

government. I was the original author of the idea of lifting the income tax threshold – there was a big debate at conference around it – though it eventually got out of control because you get to a point where it is extremely expensive and it's not very progressive. But I originated that, with David Laws' support. I think it was actually Malcolm Bruce who originally promoted the idea, but then I took it on.⁹

The idea of having a sensible – what I thought was a sensible – mixture of public and private ownership and not being ideologically hidebound was something I did in government. One or two things were privatised, notably the Royal Mail, and others were kept under public ownership, such as the Post Office. And we established two state banks, the Green Investment Bank and the British Business Bank. This was a very clear, non-ideological, pragmatic approach to ownership.

Third, the idea that government has a big role to play as a facilitator and planner was very much what I tried to do in government: the industrial strategy, support for manufacturing industry, the Catapult network; that was, I thought, very much central to our way of thinking. The big battle that I lost in government was that we should have been pursuing a more active public investment strategy. I had a big argument with [Chancellor of the Exchequer George] Osborne, but Danny [Alexander] and Nick [Clegg] didn't want to argue with the Treasury on that issue.¹⁰ The idea that you have to have public sector discipline, but combine it with active commitment to public investment – that was the view I expressed in government, and I think that's pretty much where we still are as a party. So I think I have had a lasting influence, though whether this will survive the upheavals that we have at the moment I can't say.

JLH: And that takes us nicely on to coalition. What do you think the Liberal Democrats did wrong in coalition? What could the party have done differently?

VC: I would start with putting the question the other way round: there were quite a lot of things we did right, and things we never got credit for. But I think the simple answer is that we trusted the Conservatives, and we shouldn't have. If that's something to be guilty about, I was as much guilty as anyone else. In my own department, where we had two Lib Dem ministers and six Tories, we worked together as a team very well, so I suppose I bought into the idea that we could work with those guys. I don't think any of us anticipated that they would turn round so ruthlessly to destroy us at the end.

JLH: Do you think there were individual decisions that made a big difference? People usually point to things like tuition fees, NHS reform, the bedroom tax, maybe support for austerity.

VC: I'll take each of those four. I was intimately involved with the tuition fees issue. The way I've always rationalised it – and I rationalised it in my

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mind at the time – was that it was terrible politics but very good policy. It was something we had to do, and I think this is now accepted – for example, there are press reports today on why the Augar report proposing cuts in tuition fees is a thoroughly bad idea for universities.¹¹ I think the basic logic behind what we did was totally right. An element that has been forgotten in historical terms was that [Labour minister Peter] Mandelson and [Conservative education spokesperson David] Willetts had reached an agreement before the 2010 election to set up the Browne review.¹² When I first came into office, the Browne report was near completion, and it recommended unlimited tuition fees – I think it was up to £15,000, it was a pure market-based system. But the basic principles of no upfront fees and a kind of graduate tax repayment system were in the report, and I felt that with modifications – a limit on fees, more emphasis on social mobility, strengthening of student maintenance grants – we could live with it on the basis that it was good policy.

I may be deluding myself, but I don't think it was the policy that destroyed our credibility on the issue, it was the fact that the pledge [to vote against any increase in tuition fees] had been made. A bitter argument took place a few days after the crucial Federal Policy Committee meeting when we adopted the principle of phasing out tuition fees, when Nick was approached by the National Union of Students and asked if he would publicly sign the pledge. He took the view, on the basis of Danny's advice, that he may have lost the argument in the FPC, but he could at least get the political credit for it, so he publicly signed the pledge. Now, I could see the potential for disaster and refused to sign it, and so did David Laws and I think also Stephen Williams, who was higher education spokesperson. This created a potentially major schism – the leader publicly signing it but the deputy leader refusing – a few weeks before the election. So eventually I was prevailed upon to sign it, much to the disgust of David Laws, who thought I'd sold out. I think it was the pledge which did for us.

On the bedroom tax I wasn't heavily involved. I believe it was part of a package where some quite good things were being introduced, thanks to Steve Webb, I think on the pension front.¹³ I remember that it was quite bitterly argued in the group because some of our colleagues could see how disastrous it was going to be. There was a serious rationale behind it, with older people under-occupying council houses when there wasn't enough space for young families, but the fact that it wasn't applied in the owner-occupied sector meant that it was highly inequitable, and quite vicious. So we pushed for more money to make sure that disabled people, for example, weren't disadvantaged, and that was agreed.

On NHS reform, I don't think any of us quite appreciated how much political harm this was going to cause. Fairly early on in the coalition,

all the leading departmental heads gave a presentation to the cabinet about what they wanted to do. When it came to [Health Secretary Andrew] Lansley, he spoke interminably and it was full of NHS gobbledygook that none of us could understand, and nobody quite knew what he was trying to do. Anyway, [Prime Minister David] Cameron concluded the discussion by saying, well, none of us really understand what all this is about, but Andrew seems to know what he's talking about, so we'll let him get on with it. I think at some point, Paul Burstow¹⁴ on our side, and people outside the cabinet – Shirley Williams and others – started speaking up and saying that there was a lot more trouble here than we realised. But by then we were stuck with it, and we got quite a lot of grief – though I don't think that we as Lib Dems were particularly associated with it, it was the government as a whole. While tuition fees were seen very much as a Lib Dem problem, and the bedroom tax has been used to beat us up with, the NHS reforms have not been, I think, partly because the so-called privatisation has never really happened.

And then finally, austerity. Corbyn and his crowd continue to use this as a stick to beat us with, but at the time, I think what we were doing was quite justifiable. I produced a pamphlet just before the 2010 election – it wasn't massively popular with some of my colleagues – but it was trying to say that whatever happens, whatever government is in power, there's going to have to be some fiscal tightening. You're going to have to do this in a sensible way, and use monetary policy to make sure the economy doesn't crash, but it's unavoidable that there will have to be quite difficult cuts. So I did sign up for that, while at the same time arguing that we needed more public investment. And this argument went backwards and forwards during the coalition years. I remember at one stage over the first winter, when it looked as if things were going pear-shaped, suggesting in personal correspondence with Osborne that we should use 'helicopter money' as a way of keeping the economy going; I know that the Treasury were looking at it seriously, but it never quite got bad enough.¹⁵ Quantitative easing was seen as a solution.

I think that any government would have done something similar – the Darling plan had seven years,¹⁶ our first plan had five years, and then it was extended, so actually, the scale and timing of the fiscal adjustment wasn't greatly different from what a Labour government would have done. The key point was that all of this was caused by the financial crisis, whereas the Labour opposition always wanted to say that what was called 'austerity' was caused by the coalition – forget about the banking crisis, it never really happened, or it was something in America, nothing to do with us, so this choice of tough fiscal policy measures was a product of ideologically driven Tories, which we were complicit in. And that was complete

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nonsense. I think we managed to defend a sensible economic position on austerity.

I don't think austerity did us enormous harm. I think in retrospect, clearly we needed more public investment, and there should have been a better mix of tax rises as well as spending cuts – that was a key point. There were certain areas of spending cuts, like local government, which were very damaging, partly because Tory ministers like [Communities Secretary Eric] Pickles took a kind of relish in what they were doing – punishing all those Labour authorities in the north of England who were spendthrift, and all the rest of it. But I think in areas where we had some control over the process, as in my department, public spending was approached in a sensible way.

Towards the end of the coalition, there was quite a bitter argument within the Lib Dems. By 2015, we were getting towards a reasonable budgetary position, and some of us were arguing that this was the time when we should be committing ourselves to big public investment in the railways and other things. But Danny took the view that we should sign up to the Osborne commitment to eliminate the deficit, which by then included public investment (it didn't at the beginning).

JLH: To many people it looked like Danny Alexander went native pretty quickly in the Treasury. [Clegg adviser] Richard Reeves is on record as saying we wanted to have a Lib Dem in the Treasury but we ended up getting a Treasury person in the Lib Dems. Do you think that's a fair critique?

VC: I think it's overstating it, though there is an element of truth in it. We all did to some extent, though he now exclusively carries the can for a lot of unpopular decisions – though there were plenty of times when he argued our corner very effectively. But although I was broadly on his side at the beginning of the coalition, I felt that towards the end of it, when we needed to be rethinking policy and shifting the balance, he did very much represent Treasury orthodoxy. The particular argument I had was over this rather technical, but politically very important, issue about what is the 'deficit'. If you look back at the coalition agreement, it covered the government's current budget; public investment was treated as separate. By the end, the Treasury was treating public investment like any other public spending.

JLH: Do you think decision-making would have been any different throughout the coalition if more decisions had been taken by the Coalition Committee, which was the original intention in the coalition agreement, rather than by the Quad [of Cameron, Osborne, Clegg and Alexander]?

VC: Yes, I think it probably would have been. I never hid the fact that I was rather unhappy about being left out of a lot of economic decisions, which is what happened with the Quad. You had only two on our side, who basically took the same position, and there was only one view

of the economy, which was Danny's view, largely the Treasury's. I felt the balance was wrong. To an extent this happened by accident, and I think Chris Huhne's disappearance from the government probably was a key factor in that.¹⁷

JLH: On a number of occasions there were rumours of your unhappiness with the direction of the coalition. Did you ever consider challenging Nick Clegg for the leadership?

VC: No, I didn't. There was a period towards the end – the failed so-called colonel's coup – which I didn't initiate, when there were a lot of our backbenchers who were saying we've got to have a change, and some of them saw me as the person who could be the leader if there was one. But the organisation was very rudimentary, there wasn't a systematic attempt to change, just a hope somehow that change would happen. And then my friend Matthew [Oakeshott] got involved in a particular set of events, which I think was broadly well-intentioned but turned out quite badly.¹⁸ And I got labelled, because I had been loosely associated with the rebels, that we were planning an assault on the leadership, which wasn't really accurate; it was a sort of half-truth. I suppose in retrospect I could have done, but the thing that held me back was that although the Lib Dems were getting a terrible hammering politically, we were respected for the fact that we had collectively made a difficult decision to join the coalition. Once we started fighting with each other, that respect would disappear. So although I was unhappy with certain things the leadership was doing I never took the view that there should be an orchestrated attempt to replace Nick.

JLH: Let's move on to your leadership. Did you consider standing for the leadership when Charles Kennedy stood down in 2006 or when Menzies Campbell stood down in 2007?

VC: I certainly considered it on both occasions. But on the first, the circumstances in which Charles fell were quite difficult and unpleasant. There was a strong feeling that we should rally around a respected senior uncontroversial figure; and Menzies made it clear that he was available to fill the gap. So although I may have harboured private thoughts that I could do the job, that wasn't the mood of the shadow cabinet at the time. Indeed, we were all rather shocked when Chris Huhne broke cover [and stood for the leadership], because he had been very voluble in our group in saying that we should all get behind Menzies Campbell. But he clearly saw an opportunity and, as we know from the result, his judgment was rather better than we collectively thought.

Now, on the second occasion, when Menzies was clearly on the way out, I had assumed I would stand, and I made soundings with various colleagues and good friends. But the reaction amongst all of them was, well, the old men

Right:
Liberal Democrat
autumn conference
2017
People's Vote march,
October 2018
Euro election
campaign, 2019
(Photos: Liberal
Democrats)

have had their time. I was then ten years younger than I am now! There was a very strong generational mood; I don't know who created it, it may have been the circumstances, but linked to that I quickly realised that Nick and Chris had spent much of the previous year organising their troops for when the leadership contest arose. I saw that there was no point in competing; I probably wouldn't have got enough nominations anyway. In the event it turned out well, because I was the acting leader [during the leadership campaign], and it turned out to be quite a productive phase; our support rose and I did a few good things. This was the beginning of the banking crisis, as I remember. So as acting leader, I was probably more effective than if I had contested the leadership.

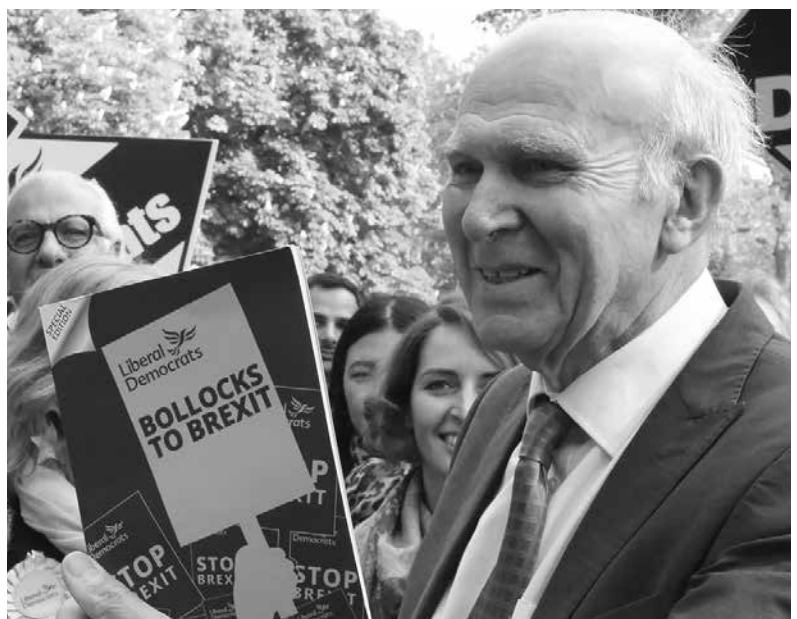
JLH: So you become leader ten years later, in 2017. Did you want to take the party in any kind of different direction politically?

VC: No, I didn't. The fact is, at that point I had inherited a largely broken vehicle. We'd had two very bad general elections, we'd lost all of our MEPs bar one, there was hardly anybody left in Scotland, and above all, we'd seen the decimation of our local government community. We were in pretty bad way. People weren't taking us seriously. I thought that my role was primarily to stabilise a bad situation and try to rebuild, which would probably require a lot of patience and optimism. I thought it could be done, but I didn't think a fundamental change in political direction was required.

I suppose to the extent in which I did think in those terms, it was partly about rehabilitating the coalition. There was a bit of a feeling that this was a guilty secret that we were trying to cover up, and I thought that wasn't right. I didn't think there was any great value in endlessly going on about it, but I believed that we had to own coalition as something we'd done, and which on balance had been good for the country. So to the extent to which I was changing direction from [previous leader] Tim Farron, it was on that issue – though he'd done a good job in restoring morale at the grassroots and taking the direction he did on Europe, and it was my job to build on that.

JLH: Did anybody act as an inspiration to you in your leadership – was there any previous leader or any other individual you modelled yourself on?

VC: It was a unique situation which we'd never had in the past. Before, we were always coming from nowhere rather than recovering from defeat. But Paddy Ashdown's style always impressed me: it was very much building up from the grassroots combined with good messaging and energy and enthusiasm from the top. And it had worked – so I did indeed follow quite a lot of things he'd done. I suppose on a purely personal level, the previous leader I was most impressed by was Jo Grimond. I'd liked the man, I'd met him a few times as a



The good thing is that when I was the leader, we were in the right place on the biggest issue of the day. I don't claim sole credit for it; Tim Farron took a very strong lead on it, and my colleagues clearly wanted us to be there. So I wasn't battling against the tide to get there, but the fact that the Lib Dems have managed to lead that movement is something I'm proud of.

student and I liked the way in which he used his position in a small party to try to influence the national debate. So if there was anybody I looked back to, it was probably him in terms of my personal style, but I also emulated some of the methods which Paddy Ashdown used.

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

VC: Recovery. We're a long way still from becoming a major national force, as we were in 2010, certainly in parliamentary terms, but we are enormously further on from where we were two years ago, and I'm pleased that I helped make some of that happen. Also, there are a lot of quiet things behind the scenes – for example, I pushed very hard from the word go to improve our social media operations. They're still very modest, but during the European election campaign, we had the best social media campaigning of any party. So there were little things of that kind. Also, having spent a lot of the last two years going round doing party dinners, going out and talking to a few activists, to see two years later that these guys are now really energised and are winning back councils – I get a big kick out of that.

JLH: And what was most challenging during your leadership?

VC: The most challenging thing was the disdain the commentators had for the party and the arrogant, slightly contemptuous view that we didn't count any more, we were a bit of an embarrassment, not really serious. It was a problem in parliament because it was very difficult to get called – we're smaller than the Scottish Nationalists, I was only getting a parliamentary question once every four weeks; even getting called in debates was a major struggle. But I think it was much more the media perception that we weren't really a force any more. It was trying to overcome that disdain which was the most difficult.

JLH: Did you play a particular role in persuading Chuka Umunna to join the party?

VC: Yes, I think so. Right at the beginning when I was first leader, I was trying to develop relationships with some of the Labour social democrats who I felt a certain affinity with. It was obvious they were unhappy. I'd sparred with some of them when I was in government, and we'd finished up with good relationships. One of the things I did as a cabinet minister was to hold regular surgeries every week for MPs – mostly Labour, but some Tories – and sometimes I was able to do helpful things which had some benefit for their constituencies. Chuka was quite keen to talk because he was most explicit about the need to break up the Labour Party, to change the leadership. So we started meeting for odd cups of coffee, and developed a good relationship.

He was very clear from the beginning that he bought into this narrative – which was

encouraged by quite a lot of Blairites – that we'd suffered too much damage to be able to lead any new force. I tried to persuade him that we at least had an infrastructure, we knew how to do things, we knew politics and we would come back again. I was surprised and disappointed when he went off with Change UK; they weren't really ready, but it was precipitated by the Luciana Berger problem with anti-Semitism. And when he was in Change UK, it wasn't clear what his role was. So I kept up a relationship with him, and I was pleasantly surprised when he quickly drew the obvious conclusion that Change UK was a cul-de-sac and came to join us. So yes, I played a part in it, and having had a relationship and mutual respect, and a lot of discussion of political ideas, made it easier.

JLH: Do you think that there are other Labour or former Labour MPs who will do the same?

VC: Yes, but I don't think they will do it in dribs and drabs. There's a large group of Labour MPs who are desperate to escape from the Corbyn coterie. I think most of them still harbour hopes that they can achieve something within the Labour Party, but I can see a point, maybe just the other side of a failed general election, where they finally cut the Gordian knot and work with us in some form. And I have discussed that with some of them; they say, yes, we consider ourselves to be liberal and European and we like you, but we have this tribal Labour connection. I think it will happen; I think that they will snap at some point, but this will present a challenge to us as a party. When it's the odd individual like Chuka, you can assimilate them, but if it's a group of fifty, then who is assimilating who?

JLH: When did you decide to resign the leadership?

VC: Just before the spring conference. Throughout the whole period of my leadership, including at the very beginning, I'd seen my role as transitional. I wasn't sure how that would work out, but by the beginning of this year I knew that I had to decide whether I was going to be around to lead us into the next election, which would then mean a commitment to another five years – and I'd be in Gladstone territory, I'd be eighty-two, eighty-three – or to pass on to someone else. If I was going to pass on somebody else, it needed to be done in a planned way, in an orderly way. So I made the statement that I did at the spring conference.

JLH: Thinking about Liberal Democrat leadership, what characteristics do you think leaders need to be able to lead this party?

VC: I think the first thing you need is a very thick skin, because you get this combination of the disdain of the commentariat who don't think you're real, combined with people in our own party who want instant success. You have to have a fairly thick skin to deal with that constant barrage of

negativity. Secondly, you need a lot of stamina. I spent most of my last two years going around the country on trains; spending a weekend somewhere to speak to thirty people isn't everybody's idea of a perfect life! But leaders need the willingness to go around and do that. Third, to have a clear sense about where you going politically, what you're trying to achieve strategically.

JLH: Do you think it's necessary or useful to have a clear vision and a clear plan, or is it more about just reacting to events?

VC: There is a lot of reacting. It is important, I think, to have a sense of direction about where you're going and to give your troops a sense of direction as to where you're going. But the fact is, we're not masters of events and we're very much driven by circumstances. We have to be willing just to adapt and respond.

JLH: And how would you describe your vision for the party?

VC: It's changing, and it's changed under different leaders. It was just about plausible at various stages – indeed, Tim Farron articulated it – to say that we could replace the Labour Party as the alternative party of the left, but the Labour Party has proved to be a lot more durable than we gave them credit for. I think Nick had a very clear view of us as a kind of centrist Dutch-style liberal party; he somehow assumed that the voting system would change and of course it didn't.

What I envisage, which partly reflects current circumstances, is that we've got to set out our stall in terms of basic values – liberal, social democratic, internationalist – to provide a kind of beacon for people to come to. I think it's important to put it that way round rather than thinking in terms of how we position ourselves against other parties, because we can't do anything about them. If the Labour Party splits, the Tory Party splits, well and good, and that helps us to move forward, but we can't make that happen. Much of my frustration over the last year came from people constantly coming to me and saying: why don't you create this new centre movement? Why haven't you managed to split the Tories, or the Labour Party, and get them to join you? The world isn't like that.

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

VC: I think as leader during a positive, optimistic period in which we went from

weakness to genuine recovery and a real sense of optimism about the future. But this has to be put in the context that this is a period of massive crisis for the country. And the good thing is that when I was the leader, we were in the right place on the biggest issue of the day. I don't claim sole credit for it; Tim Farron took a very strong lead on it, and my colleagues clearly wanted us to be there. So I wasn't battling against the tide to get there, but the fact that the Lib Dems have managed to lead that movement is something I'm proud of.

JLH: Are you going to remain active in politics?

VC: Yes, though I'm not quite sure how. I've made it clear that I'm happy to continue as MP for Twickenham to the end of the Parliament, but none of us know how long that will be; it could be a few months, it could be two and half years. Then subsequently, I want to do more writing – mainly books, but also newspapers and magazines. I want to come along to conferences and try to influence debate without feeling that I'm having to defend the party line on every occasion. I will support my local party; I've been active in it for thirty years or thereabouts: it's a strong, healthy party, it's well organised and has good membership. I suppose I've contributed to that, and I don't want to let that legacy go.

JLH: Thank you very much.

- 1 Jo Grimond (leader of the Liberal Party 1956–67), attacked Labour leader Hugh Gaitskell's defence of his party's opposition to UK membership of the European Community in 1962.
- 2 Chris Mason: Chair of the Scottish Liberal Party 1987–88.
- 3 Alan Watson: President of the Liberal Party 1984–85; Liberal and then Alliance candidate for Richmond, 1974, 1979, 1983, 1987; entered House of Lords 1999.
- 4 Manuela Sykes (1925–2017): fought five elections, including in Ipswich, between 1955 and 1966, as a Liberal, and then two elections, in 1972 and 1974, as Labour. Later diagnosed with dementia, she campaigned for the rights of people diagnosed with dementia, and won her right to be allowed to live in her own home in 2014.
- 5 Paul Marshall and David Laws (eds.), *The Orange Book: Reclaiming Liberalism* (Profile Books, 2004). Vince Cable contributed the chapter on 'Liberal economics and social justice'.
- 6 Matthew Taylor: MP for Truro and St Austell, 1987–2010, manifesto coordinator for the

- 2005 election; entered House of Lords 2010.
- 7 Chris Rennard: Director of Campaigns & Elections 1989–2003, Chief Executive 2003–09. Entered House of Lords 1999.
- 8 David Laws: MP for Yeovil, 2001–15; co-editor of *The Orange Book*; Chief Secretary to the Treasury 2010, Minister of State for Schools / Cabinet Office, 2012–15.
- 9 Malcolm Bruce: MP for Gordon 1983–2010; Treasury spokesperson 1994–99; entered House of Lords 2010.
- 10 Danny Alexander: MP for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch & Strathspey 2005–15; Secretary of State for Scotland 2010, Chief Secretary to the Treasury 2010–15. Nick Clegg: MP for Sheffield Hallam 2005–17, Leader of the Liberal Democrats 2007–15, Deputy Prime Minister 2010–15.
- 11 A report into post-18 education and funding, written by a commission headed by Philip Augar, was published in May 2019. On 8 August (the day of this interview), the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee criticised the report for its likely impact on the funding of universities.
- 12 The Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance, written by a commission chaired by Lord Browne of Madingley, was launched on 9 November 2009 and published its findings on 12 October 2010.
- 13 Steve Webb: MP for Thornbury & Yate 1997–2015, Minister of State for Pensions 2010–15.
- 14 Paul Burstow: MP for Sutton & Cheam 1997–2015, Minister of State for Care Services 2010–12.
- 15 'Helicopter money' is an expansionary fiscal policy financed by an increase in money supply. It could be an increase in spending or a tax cut, but it involves printing large sums of money and distributing it to the public in order to stimulate the economy.
- 16 Alistair Darling, Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer 2007–10. Labour fought the 2010 election on a promise to reduce the government deficit by more than two-thirds over five years.
- 17 Chris Huhne: MP for Eastleigh 2005–13, Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, 2010–12; resigned from the government in 2012 when charged with conspiracy to pervert the course of justice (to avoid a speeding penalty).
- 18 In April 2014 Liberal Democrat peer Matthew Oakeshott privately commissioned a poll in four key Liberal Democrat seats which showed that the party was at danger of losing all of them, but would pick up votes if another figure replaced Clegg as party leader. After the poll was leaked to the press the following month, Oakeshott resigned from the party; he now sits as a non-affiliated peer in the House of Lords.