

Leadership

Interview with Jo Swinson on her period as Leader of the Liberal Democrats

Jo Swinson

JO SWINSON WAS first elected MP for East Dunbartonshire in 2005. During the coalition government she served as a Parliamentary Private Secretary from 2010 to 2012, first to Business Secretary Vince Cable and then to Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, and as Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Employment Relations, Consumer and Postal Affairs at the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills from 2012 to 2015. She lost her seat in the 2015 election but was re-elected in 2017, and served as Deputy Leader of the Liberal Democrat parliamentary party under Tim Farron and then Vince Cable. On 22 July 2019 she was elected Leader of the Liberal Democrats, being the first woman and the youngest person to hold the position. She lost her seat in the 2019 election, by just 149 votes, and therefore ceased to be leader. In August, the *Journal of Liberal History* interviewed her about her political career and, especially, her period as leader.

JLH Let's start with your political beliefs. How and when did you decide you were a Liberal Democrat?

JS My realisation that I was a Lib Dem happened in my teenage years when I was debating at school. As I looked up all the different parties' policies, it became clear to me that the Lib Dems were where my home was. The two things that particularly stuck out for me at that point were education and PR. This was in the mid 1990s, when the penny on income tax for education was the party's flagship policy. It seemed to me that education is the foundation of everything else that you want to achieve in society, whether impacts on health or crime or employment; it's such a good investment.

In terms of PR, I grew up in a constituency that seemed as if it would always vote Labour no matter what candidates were put up. I really

railed against the unfairness of that because it didn't really matter how people voted; if you voted against Labour, your vote didn't count. Ironically, I then went on to represent that area! – albeit with boundary changes. And then the SNP were the party to take the seat from me on both occasions, so those bastions of one-party states were not quite the fortresses that they once looked like. Nevertheless, the commitment to electoral reform was a key driver.

I didn't join the party at that point, I became a supporter from the sidelines cheering on the Lib Dems in the 1997 election, which I was very frustrated that I couldn't vote in. When I went to university that autumn, I joined at the Freshers' Fair, and through my membership I saw the strands of environmentalism and internationalism running through Liberal values; they struck a chord with me as issues I had already campaigned on through Amnesty International and Friends of the Earth. So the party's values were very much in line with my values.

JLH Moving on to the coalition: you were a PPS and a minister for almost all the coalition government.

What was your experience like?

JS It was a huge learning curve for all of us. We didn't have experience of being in government at Westminster – with, I think, the exception of Tom McNally, who had served as a PPS in the 1970s! So although we drew from our Holyrood colleagues – Jim Wallace and others who had served as ministers in the Scottish government – we were all on a big learning curve. I think that's part of the reason why some of the things that we did early on we wouldn't have done in year three; by that time we had worked out how things operated, how you could make the system work and what you had to do to get your priorities through.

Swinson at Liberal Democrat conference, September 2019 (Photo: Liberal Democrats)

n as leader



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Of course, no one joins the Liberal Democrats because they're on a power trip or because they want to get their hands on the levers of government at all costs; we had not expected to find ourselves able to put into practice the things that we had campaigned on and really cared about. My portfolio as a minister covered employment rights, consumer affairs, corporate governance. I was able to drive through policies like corporate reporting on human rights and greenhouse gas emissions, gender pay gap reporting, shared parental leave, the Consumer Rights Act, the Groceries Code adjudicator – these were opportunities to make changes to improve people's lives, and because you go into politics to change things, this was incredibly rewarding. And as a minister, even just the things that you say have an impact: you can make a speech, and people within the industries or sectors you're talking about will take that as guidance, as the direction of travel. So you really can drive change, not just through regulation, but by encouraging behavioural change in others.

I think we did do a huge amount of good. It was particularly good to work with Vince in the business department. We were the only department that had two Lib Dem ministers, and I think that gave us quite a lot of heft. I was double-hatted with my equalities portfolio, and I found that I much more free rein in the business brief, because Vince wasn't going to block stuff, but where I dealt with a Conservative Secretary of State it was much more difficult, whether it was on the gender pay gap, international accords on LGBT+ rights, media objectification or progress on caste discrimination – it was those things that were getting blocked by the Tories. And of course, many of those day-to-day battles never saw the light of day in terms of the media outside, but they were the constant grind of trying within government to make things fairer.

The other thing that I learned from coalition, and just being in government generally, was the huge complexity of most problems. It's easy to make up a soundbite policy, but turning that policy into reality, even with something like shared parental leave where there was no doubt over the government's commitment, was difficult. People's lives are complicated; how do you design shared parental leave so that it works in practice for everyone?

So, having been a minister, I found being an MP again after 2017, when I was re-elected, quite different. I couldn't just reach for that easy soundbite and pretend that I thought it was

that simple – which in some ways was a shame because a straightforward soundbite is often the more attention-grabbing thing to say! But it can often be too simplistic, and I found it very hard to go back to that mindset when you understand the wider context in which decisions are made. I think I was ultimately a better politician, and I think that my words carried more weight in the House of Commons and beyond, because of that experience.

JLH Was there anything the party could or should have done differently in coalition that would have avoided the catastrophe of the 2015 election?

JS There were certainly things we should have done differently. As I mentioned before, we learned so much about how to do government. I got gender pay gap reporting through at the very tail end of the government, and I think I was only able to do that because by that point I'd been a minister for nearly three years. I could see the opportunity and who I needed to speak to, which included making sure the Labour Party were also making the right noises about it as well. Just before the general election, the political circumstances were such that it wouldn't be blocked, because the cost of doing that then were much higher for the Conservatives. I wouldn't have understood how to do all that at the beginning.

Tuition fees are another example. At the time we were working within the bounds of the Department of Business's budget, and we knew that we shouldn't, for example, raid the further education budget because of the impacts on social mobility. What we should have done was to argue that we needed to reopen the comprehensive spending review and say that we needed another three billion because we couldn't possibly raise tuition fees. I think we hadn't realised, frankly, how the Treasury has these 'sofas' that it finds a few billion pounds down the back of. That's happening on a massive scale now, of course, but even then, I think, money could somehow have been found. But we didn't realise that that was something that we could do. That was a good example of something we got wrong because we were answering the wrong question.

Some people say that we should never have gone into coalition. I totally reject that. It was the right thing for the country. It was the right thing for our party too. Our own irrelevance would have been absolutely sealed if we had walked away from the offer that was made to put so many of our policies into practice at that point of national crisis. It was the right thing to do.

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JLH You talked about making sure that Labour was making the right noises on gender pay gap reporting. Did you deal with the Labour Party much when you were a minister?

JS Yes. On that particular issue, I was encouraging the campaign; Labour MPs were also involved, and I had good relationships with them. It was helpful that Labour pushed it in the Lords, because that gave us the chance to say that there was no way we could keep our peers on board – we're going to lose and therefore we have to do it.

I had good relationships with my opposite numbers – Chuka Umunna was the Labour business spokesperson. I generally took the approach that it didn't matter what party they came from, if an MP was asking me a question at oral question time in good faith, they deserved a good answer. For example, I remember that Andy Sawford, the MP for Corby, was worried about people being exploited in agency work conditions in his town. I met him, I worked with the department, who mounted a big investigation and they found that there were genuine problems, and there was action taken. And when I was PPS to Vince and then Nick, I wrote to all MPs, I gave them my mobile number in case there were issues they wanted to raise; I organised surgeries so that they could come and talk to us. That's a part of politics that doesn't really get shown outside, but I just felt that that was part of the job and that was the right way to do it.

I also think it's a smart way to work, because it gives you a little bit of the benefit of the doubt when things are difficult, when you have to explain something which is tricky, or when you get sent out with a crap line – sometimes that happens in government! – you experience a little more understanding from people on the other side if you'd also been genuinely engaging and trying to take their concerns seriously.

JLH You lost your seat at the end of the coalition, but you were re-elected in 2017, and then you became deputy leader almost straight away, for the last months of Tim Farron's leadership and then for the whole of Vince Cable's leadership. Was that a useful preparation for your leadership?

JS I'm glad I did it, but the job of deputy leader is very different from being leader – and the issues that I faced as leader, and the level of scrutiny and the sheer variety and number of things needing attention, were very very different. Bear in mind that I was leader at a particularly turbulent time in politics, with unprecedented goings-on with prorogation and the Supreme Court ruling and all the Brexit

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and cross-party negotiations, and then the run-up to the general election. It's fair to say that it was a particularly high-intensity time to be doing the job, and being deputy leader didn't quite prepare me for any of that! But I'm very glad I did it. And it was great to work with Tim and also with Vince, having served under Vince in the business department.

JLH Did you think about standing for the leadership in 2017 when Tim Farron stood down?

JS I was inundated with people asking me to do so. But let's just remember the context. Tim stood down six days after the 2017 general election. I don't think I'd even managed to read and reply to all the messages of congratulation, and suddenly I was getting all these people saying: run for leader. I had been an MP before, but I had no staff, I had no office; it was like being a new MP all over again.

Obviously I thought about it, but in the end I was very confident that the decision not to run was the right one. I didn't feel at that point that I definitely would run to be leader at some point – I thought it was quite likely, but I wanted to be sure that I knew what I wanted to do with it. Rather than being something, it's about doing something.

JLH So when did you decide that you did want to stand?

JS It was in early September 2018 that Vince made a speech that announced that he would be stepping down; he'd rung me a couple of weeks before to let me know. My initial reaction was that it was much too soon – partly because I had a six-week-old baby, so I wasn't even sleeping more than about three hours a night, and everything was a bit of a haze! But later in the autumn, I did start to think about it seriously. It wasn't entirely clear when he would be stepping down; he would have fought a general election if it had taken place in the spring, and I was quite happy to remain his deputy leader through an election. Towards the end of 2018, I increasingly felt that when the time came, I would run for leader, and by the beginning of 2019 I was clear that I would. So I started putting together a campaign team and mapping out what I wanted to do.

JLH And what was that? What did you want to do with the party leadership?

JS When Theresa May called the election in 2017, I knew in a heartbeat that I wanted to run for parliament. I hadn't spent the previous two years thinking that I must get re-elected, but the Brexit vote really affected me. It wasn't just

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Swinson with Chuka Umunna and Sarah Wollaston, August 2019 – both MPs who left the Independent Group for Change to join the Liberal Democrats (Photo: Andre Camara / Liberal Democrats)

On the campaign trail, with Layla Moran, Cambridge, November 2019 (Photo: Andre Camara / Liberal Democrats)

On the campaign trail, Esher, December 2019 (Photo: Liberal Democrats)

I hadn't spent the previous two years thinking that I must get re-elected, but the Brexit vote really affected me. It wasn't just about leaving the EU institutions, it was about who we are as a country, it was about the values of internationalism, liberal values: it felt to me that they were under attack. It was similar in some ways to the Scottish independence referendum, where I felt a deep emotional pull. The nationalism and populism which lies behind both those movements really felt like a big threat.

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I knew that the forces ranged against that nationalism and populism were and are fragmented. People who are small l-liberals were and are in different parties. We had a Labour leadership that was not liberal and probably didn't mind if Brexit went ahead, but there were plenty of people in the Labour Party – MPs and members and voters – who did share those values with us. And equally, you could see some people in the Conservative Party – fewer of them, perhaps, but there were 'soft' Conservatives who were also not being well served. But all these people were fragmented, and it seemed to me that there might be a way of bringing these people together – and that's where I felt I could genuinely offer something, because I had good links with the different parties, and I would be able to play that role as leader of the Liberal Democrats.

It wasn't clear to me then what that would look like; I was very open-minded about it. Then the Independent Group for Change was formed in February 2019, which I felt was a great positive move, because the status quo needed to be disrupted – but they found in the European elections that they couldn't deliver even in a proportional system. They hadn't fully taken into account the fact that centrism isn't a political value, and that setting up a new party is incredibly difficult to do. But I think it was helpful that they tried. It became increasingly clear that the Liberal Democrats were a potential vehicle to make that happen, but that wasn't obvious at the start of 2019.

So my aim was to bring those forces together so that we could collectively help our values to win through, and part of that would be stopping Brexit – though I've always felt that Brexit was a symptom of wider problems; it wasn't the be-all and end-all. There's no doubt that we're facing an uphill struggle, but I still believe that we need to find ways to work with others who share our values even if they find themselves wearing different coloured rosettes at election time.

JLH Did you want to take the party in any different direction politically?

JS One of the things I had been looking forward to doing after the general election was

policy development. For obvious reasons, we fought the election on a manifesto that had been drawn up for a potential spring election, with a few changes, but that meant that we didn't start with my vision as leader and then work that through and create a coherent manifesto out of it. One of the things that I said often in interviews – and I meant every word – was that we need to reshape the economy so that it works for people and the planet. I know that we had some policies in our manifesto that would have helped with that, but did we have the whole prescription? No, I don't believe we did; and actually I don't believe that anybody has it entirely figured out yet.

We've ended up with this populist nationalist movement, which isn't going to solve the problems that people face, but is offering up comforting soundbites. It's not just a UK problem; you see the same thing in America and in other countries, but the response hasn't been developed properly. I think we're a decade too late – the liberal, progressive, centre-left of politics, the Liberal Democrats and the Labour Party, we should have had an alternative plan ready to go when the financial crisis hit. But instead there were big vested interests pressing for a return to business as usual, and the Euro-sceptics were claiming that it was all the fault of immigrants, and the solution is to leave the EU – which of course doesn't actually help the problem. I feel the work of developing a coherent alternative economic system still needs to be done.

JLH Did you have any organisational agenda? Do you want to do anything to the structures of the party, the way it operated?

JS I was very aware that that was the kind of thing that would eat up time! Recruiting Mike Dixon as chief executive was something I was proud of doing because his experience of managing organisations at scale is going to be helpful.

I was pretty determined to move on diversity, and I took the opportunities I could in the time that I had – but our decision-making is so white and still very male, and when I was leader it was still too much of both those things. That is a challenge within the party, because we stand for equality and liberty, and so we can easily think of ourselves as the good guys, as if we don't think sexist or racist thoughts, as if everyone is judged on their merits. But it's just not true; if we're pretending that our party is immune to the structural inequalities in our society, then that really makes us part of the problem. There are lots of people in the party

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who are doing great stuff on this, but there are still too many people who don't think we need to change that much.

JLH Leaders always tend to have different styles. Was there any previous leader, or any other individual, that you modelled yourself on?

JS I don't think I saw clear role models in our past leaders, because it's hard to see role models in people that don't look like you. But Charles [Kennedy] was a great influence on me. He was leader when I first became an MP and he was a much-loved colleague and had a real straightforwardness and warmth. I saw Nick [Clegg]'s leadership at close quarters when I was his PPS. And there were people like Shirley [Williams] who had always been an inspiration to me in the party. But I think that what I found when I was a minister, and it was the same when I became leader, that it was about finding what was my own way of doing it, and using the strengths that I had, rather than modelling myself on somebody else. I was only leader for a few months, I was still on a learning curve, but I think I brought a clarity and a focus and an energy to the role that many people responded well to.

JLH Most leaders, at one time or another, have had problems with the parliamentary party. Was that a feature of your leadership at any point?

JS I wouldn't say so. There were definitely challenges borne out of the fact that we were absorbing lots of defectors – but those were nice problems to have! When somebody joined us, we had to go through a process of working with the local party where there was already a candidate in place – that was obviously a very sensitive discussion – and we had to make sure that their staff were OK; it was a big change for them, and not even their decision. So for each person that joined us there was a lot that needed to be done. This didn't really cause problems with the parliamentary party, but I was very aware that as the party grew, people needed support and help. And it was very important, obviously, that the people who joined us had a good experience – because if they had a bad experience, who else was going to do it? I was really proud of our party, of our candidates, for being so good at putting the bigger picture ahead of their own personal ambition and ensuring that their local parties welcomed the defectors.

I remember reading in the *Evening Standard* a piece by Ayesha Hazarika about Luciana [Berger]; she'd drawn the contrast between the previous Labour conference where Luciana

had had to go with a bodyguard, and then she came to the Lib Dem conference and everywhere people just wanted to give her a hug and she was welcomed and found friendship. I've always thought our party is a lovely party! I know that some of it was difficult for people, but the party really stepped up to show that we were open and inclusive and weren't going to be tribal, to recognise the scale of the challenge that we were facing and the need to bring people together to be able to fight it.

JLH Let's move on to the 2019 election. In retrospect, do you think it was a mistake not only to have pressed for the election, but actually to have introduced a bill to bring it in?

JS No. If you're asking me, was that my ideal timing for the election, then no, it wasn't, but we had to cope with the circumstances we faced at the time. Just to remind you, just a few days before, Boris Johnson had secured a second reading for his Withdrawal Bill with the help of nineteen Labour MPs. At that point, the twentyish Tory rebels who had been pretty reliably voting with us to get the Benn Act through, to support the Letwin amendment – all trying to make sure that we could avoid a no-deal Brexit – they had gone back to vote loyally with the government, and they'd been very open about the fact that that was what they were going to do if Johnson got a deal, with the exception of those that had actually left the party, like Dominic Grieve and Justine Greening. So at that point, the prospect of assembling a majority for a people's vote fell away, because the only way those Tories were going to vote for a people's vote was if it was the only way to avoid no deal, and they now had a deal. So we didn't have the chance of getting a people's vote through, we had Boris getting a majority for his deal, but we were still a few days away from crashing out without a deal because we hadn't had an extension [to the Article 50 negotiations] granted. I'd had conversations with [French President] Macron's special adviser on Europe, and he'd been very clear to me that Macron was not minded to grant an extension – and it was the French that were blocking it within the EU – if there wasn't clarity about how the situation would be resolved.

So we couldn't get a people's vote and Boris had a route to get his deal through. The only thing the House of Commons had been reliably voting for was to stop a no-deal Brexit. Ultimately, those nineteen Labour MPs were going to get that bill through and then Brexit would have been an absolute certainty. So what were our options at that point? There didn't seem

to be a lot of choices, but going for an election with a chance to stop it felt like it was worth trying. And let's remember, tens of thousands of people had joined our party, six million people had signed the petition to revoke Article 50, nearly a million people had marched in the streets of London because they didn't want Brexit, we'd had an election [the European election] where lots of people had voted for us for the first time and for the first time we had beaten both Labour and the Conservatives. So I think for us at that point, if we'd just said, well, we'll have some late-night committee sessions to try to amend the Withdrawal Bill, but we won't try to stop it – I don't think that would have been true to ourselves. And the window of time to have an election was very short. There wasn't enough time for an election between Christmas and the 31st January extension date (if granted), and if you wanted to have an election before Christmas, then you had to call it at the end of October or the beginning of November. It was not the scenario we wanted. We wanted a people's vote, but Johnson getting the deal with Europe and then getting it through the House of Commons changed everything.

JLH You didn't think there was any realistic prospect of a referendum being attached to the bill during its progress through committee?

JS I don't see how the numbers added up. On the Conservative side, you weren't getting Tory rebels any more, apart from Justine and Dominic, and then Phillip [Lee] and Sam [Gyimah] had joined us. But you couldn't rely on Labour either. Let's remember that at this time Labour were not voting for a people's vote. We had laid an amendment to the Queen's Speech arguing for a people's vote, and we were told that it was the wrong time. We were about ten days away from crashing out without a deal and we were told it was the wrong time! There were many supporters of a people's vote in the Labour Party who worked incredibly hard to try to get their colleagues on board, and were very frustrated with them, but Corbyn didn't want a people's vote. Corbyn would have been quite happy with Brexit getting through and trying to blame it on the Tories and not having to talk about it. And those nineteen Labour MPs supported the Brexit bill.

The idea that you were going to get all of the Labour Party voting for a people's vote was just not credible. I know that there are people who like to believe that it would have happened, but when we were that close to no deal and they still weren't prepared to, then I don't think they were ever going to.

JLH Do you think the SNP would have voted for an early election anyway, regardless of what the Liberal Democrats did – which would have given the government a majority?

JS Yes, I do. There were two sets of meetings going on during the autumn. There were the functional cross-party meetings to agree amendments and so on, where people might have had different objectives but they were upfront about it and worked constructively to get things done. And then there were the opposition leaders' meetings, which were very frustrating and were really for show; Corbyn didn't want anything to happen, he just wanted to look like he was doing something. In early September, we had to hold back Corbyn and the SNP from going for an election by pointing out that if they went for the election then, then Boris would have the chance to choose the date, and he could have chosen a date that meant the UK would crash out of the EU during the campaign. They took a lot of holding back.

But after the deal was agreed, we had this impasse. Either we went ahead and debated the bill in committee – which Labour might have been quite happy for, but went against what we wanted to be the outcome – or you had an election. The only way to bring some resolution was either a people's vote or a general election, and Boris getting the deal basically decided which one it was going to be.

JLH There were rumours that the defectors were keener on the election than the more long-standing Lib Dem MPs, because they were more gung-ho, less realistic, about the party's prospects. Is that a fair comment?

JS I don't think so. Obviously we had quite a long discussion within the parliamentary party about the merits of going for the election, and I can remember a couple of voices being raised against it, but one of them was a defector and the other was a long-standing colleague. Most people, I think, understood that if the election didn't happen, the alternative was the bill passing and Brexit happening. People were adamant about wanting to do everything we possibly could to stop Brexit; they could see the logic that this was the last chance that we had.

JLH Let's turn to the election campaign. The party's General Election Review identified a series of problems: an unwarranted degree of optimism about the party's prospects after the local and European election results; the revoke policy; the 'your candidate for prime minister' message and falling ratings for you personally. On top of that, there were organisational problems within the party which predated your leadership,

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but they also identified a tendency to centralise decision-making in a small group around you. Do you think that's a fair summary? What do you think were the main problems?

JS I think the main problems for us that had the biggest impact on the election were: Boris Johnson securing a Brexit deal; Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage coming to an electoral pact to avoid their vote being split; and Jeremy Corbyn being so toxic and unpalatable as a prospect for prime minister. Understandably, the review focused on the things which were within our control, but I think we should not forget that many of the biggest forces in politics that have the most impact on election outcomes are not within our control. I'm not going to sit here and say that everything was done perfectly. Of course, it wasn't, not least because we weren't ready for an election! But the idea that if we'd done X or Y differently it would have led to a markedly different result? I haven't seen any evidence that suggests that.

On the revoke policy, remember that six million people had signed a petition saying that they wanted this to happen; it wasn't as if it was a fringe position, and it's not as if we had been quiet about saying that we wanted to stop Brexit. We hadn't had time to work out how that position would be attacked and we hadn't worked out our rebuttals; I'm sure we could have done that given more time. But, ultimately, we wanted to stop Brexit, so however we put it – whether we said we wanted to have a people's vote or whether we said we would revoke – we were going to be attacked, and that was already happening. And it did give us clarity. So, you can debate this, but I think the idea that everybody who was upset by the revoke policy would have been totally fine if it had been a people's vote doesn't stack up.

Were we too optimistic? We were taking a calculated risk, based on the circumstances of the time, to try to stop something that was about to happen that we felt fundamentally was an affront to our values. Since Corbyn was so unpalatable, the only route to stop Brexit was us having a very good election and getting momentum – and you don't do that by saying that our aim was to double our seats, and we're going to focus everything on getting those twenty or so MPs. We could have done that, but we made a clear choice not to do it, and I don't regret that because we would have been saying that we're OK for Brexit to go ahead as long as we win 22 or 24 MPs. We would have been saying from the off that we weren't really serious about stopping Brexit, we were only trying to get a few more votes.

The 'your candidate for PM' message? Again, I think we didn't have enough time to do proper testing. This was people in the Campaigns Department; I didn't write the leaflets – but it's something that we have said before. Nick said it very explicitly in 2010, when we'd been in a similar place in the polls – in fact, this time round, we were closer to the other parties – and he didn't get anything like this kind of pushback. I think we didn't properly anticipate quite how it would be perceived when it was coming from a young woman. It's well documented how ambition in women is still something which is punished.

If we had had longer, we would have been able to do more testing about what the framing, the communication, should have been. There's stuff in the general election review report which is definitely useful, and I'm not going to sit here and say that we did everything perfectly – but on the big calls, given the circumstances at the time, I'd largely make those again. Someone said to me – and I think there's a lot of truth in it – that a calculated risk is not the same as a mistake. We knew that we were pursuing something that was risky, but pursuing a real safety-first approach didn't feel like it would have met the circumstances of the time, when there was so much at stake, where we had momentum, where we had a record number of members, where people were looking for hope between Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn. Now, we didn't manage to convert that into enough momentum to create a vastly different outcome. But the thought that we shouldn't have tried doesn't sit well with what we set out to do in politics.

The report was right to focus on what we did rather than the external context, but I remember something which Nick said to me when I became leader: don't underestimate how little of what we do actually has any impact. So much is determined by the forces around us. At the end of the day, that voter that people were trying to convince to vote for us, who was terrified of Jeremy Corbyn becoming prime minister – it didn't matter what we did. We could promise – as we did, multiple times – that we would never put him in Downing Street, but if they felt that the safest thing they could do to guard against Corbyn getting into Number 10 was to vote Tory, there wasn't much we could do about it. And the polarisation worked the other way as well.

JLH Let's look at a couple of those issues in a little more detail. On the vote to revoke Article 50 at the autumn conference, it was rumoured at the time, and

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A lot of the people who are pointing the finger at [the revoke] policy now weren't exactly speaking up at the time, saying, oh, no, this will be a problem! Also I think that we can overstate the idea that we wouldn't have come under attack for the basic wanting-to-stop-Brexit approach through a slightly different policy.

the review actually says this, that you decided to support it to head off what you thought was going to be a clash at conference, that the motion was going to be submitted anyway, so you thought you needed to support it to avoid a fight at your first conference after becoming leader. Is that true?

JS I don't think it was about not wanting a clash. This was a motion that had been submitted to previous conferences, and since then, we had had a national petition that six million people had signed in support of it. And Labour's policy was rumoured to be moving towards a people's vote. So you have to remember the context. And let's remember what the policy actually was, which was that if we elected a Liberal Democrat majority government, we would revoke Article 50. I think everybody accepts that if we elected a Liberal Democrat majority government, it would be a seismic event and it would have given us that level of mandate. So it didn't feel like an extreme position. And, by the way, we also went up in the polls significantly, by 8 per cent amongst remainers, after it was announced, because it gave us clarity; there were still some people who didn't know what our policy was on Brexit.

As I said, greater and more in-depth work on rebuttals and so on could have been done if we had had more time – but it did feel as if it was the right time, and it also felt like Lib Dem conference would vote for it, so it wasn't anything to do with being scared of conference. And a lot of the people who are pointing the finger at this policy now weren't exactly speaking up at the time, saying, oh, no, this will be a problem! Also I think that we can overstate the idea that we wouldn't have come under attack for the basic wanting-to-stop-Brexit approach through a slightly different policy.

JLH With the benefit of hindsight, the policy certainly made sense when it looked as if the Brexit process was going to end up with no deal, but when Johnson managed to negotiate a deal, that changed the context, and the revoke policy perhaps stopped being such an obvious answer. Was there any consideration of that at the time?

JS That's why I mentioned the three things that I think were absolutely pivotal in the election: Johnson getting the deal was one of them. There was still the risk of no deal, but it was very hard to get that message across to people; everyone just thought, there's a deal. And Tory MPs didn't care what was in the deal, they just wanted to know that there was a deal.

At that point, did we think about changing our policy? Conference had just voted for it three weeks before! If we had turned around and said, now we're not supporting revoke,

that would have suddenly sowed a lot of uncertainty. The headlines would have been: are the Lib Dems for stopping Brexit or are they not for stopping Brexit? We had a clear position and increasing numbers of people knew what our position was. It was a polarising position because this was the issue of the day, it was an incredibly polarising issue. But we did want to stop Brexit! We couldn't adopt a nice sitting-on-the-fence position; there's only so much that you can sugar-coat things like that. That was our position and some people weren't going to like it and we were going to get attacked for it.

JLH Fair enough. So on the 'Jo Swinson for prime minister' message – OK, Nick had used a similar one in 2010, but the context was rather different then. The party had 60 MPs at the time, it had consistently scored well in the polls throughout most of the previous parliament. After 2017 the Lib Dems had twelve MPs and apart from a brief period in the spring and summer of 2019, had been scoring very poorly. Surely the message didn't look credible right from the beginning?

JS Well, look, I wasn't the first person to talk about it during the leadership campaign. The first person to say it then was Ed [Davey]!

I think it was born out of the choice on offer: both Corbyn and Johnson being so unacceptable to big chunks of the population. And just to say, well, that's tough, that's your choice, didn't seem appealing, and it would have got us immediately into that cul-de-sac of questions about who we were going to support if we held the balance of power. It obviously didn't manage to get us out of that hole, but if we had managed to continue on our 20 per cent-ish ratings, then there was a chance that, while getting to be prime minister was not particularly likely, the positioning of it gave us an opportunity to get many more MPs and to be in a situation where neither Johnson nor Corbyn could be prime minister, even though it would probably have been somebody else from one of those parties. It was a positioning that was trying to create the potential for a different outcome. We've seen in previous campaigns that opinion can suddenly shift, but you can't suddenly shift your ambition up if you start off saying that we just want to get twenty MPs.

Then Boris Johnson refused to debate me, and we didn't have a place in those leadership debates. We were taking ITV to court on this, and then ITV announced that if the case was found against them, the debate wouldn't go ahead at all. There was no way they thought that no one would want to watch a three-way debate; they decided it purely because the

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participants weren't going to rock up. There's a good reason why Johnson didn't want to debate me: he saw it would be a risk. I don't know how it would have gone, but it would have been a huge opportunity to boost our credibility. We were trying to create these opportunities, trying to get into those debates, and saying that we're standing all these candidates, therefore our leader is a candidate for prime minister, is part of how we made the argument to be in the debate in the first place.

The decisions about how we communicated that on leaflets were not ones that I made; I didn't say that I wanted this to be our strapline! We had some polling that was positive and suggested that people wanted something different, and so those decisions were made by campaigners who make those kind of decisions at every election.

JLH What about the criticism the review made, that decision-making was too centralised round you and a small group around you, who were not open enough to alternative views – and also, because everything was centralised, decision-making was too slow. Is that a fair criticism?

JS I would challenge you to find me a previous election review that doesn't make the same criticism of any leader in the past! The team that did the strategic thinking included about a dozen people, MPs, members of the House of Lords, people from different parts of the country – there were quite a lot of different views being fed in. But part of the problem was time. When the election started, I was still recruiting people to the leader's team. As soon as I became leader I put adverts out for key roles and did interviews, in some cases within a few days – but people have notice periods to work out. My press secretary didn't start until conference, and my chief of staff didn't start until two weeks before that (though I had an excellent interim chief of staff). We were at the very early stages of being a functioning team. I would have loved to have had more time to have developed my team and got everything working well.

JLH What are you most proud of in your leadership?

JS Inheriting a party that had a black hole in the finances and raising more money than we ever had before in a general election – including the single largest individual donation in British political history – raising more than £14 million; reaching record high membership figures; attracting more MPs to defect to the party in the space of three months than in our thirty-year history as a party; improving our strategic position for next time by securing 91 second places at the election, up from 38; increasing the vote share at

the general election by the greatest amount ever by the Liberal Democrats. I think for less than five months' work, that's not too bad!

JLH And what did you find most challenging, apart from the general election, in your period as leader?

JS The most challenging thing was not enough time: both on a day-to-day basis and on a longer time horizon, whether it was developing a full policy platform to underpin my vision, which would have taken months, or getting my team fully recruited and working together. Everything was so frenetic, with parliament being shut down, racing towards a no deal and then a general election – none of it was normal times! From the very beginning, it felt like a huge amount of pressure; I felt like I was running from day one. In the end, we had until December for the election to take place, but at one point it looked like it could have happened in October.

JS What characteristics do you think leaders need to possess to be able to lead the Liberal Democrats well?

JS In reflecting on my time, I'm struck by how much it's about relationships, whether that's with the parliamentary party, with people at HQ, with those in our party's committees, and people from other political persuasions who you need to work with – relationships on so many levels. Those relationships of trust are transformational, if you can get them right, as to what you can achieve. For example, in the Unite to Remain alliance [with the Green Party and Plaid Cymru], it was far easier to conduct negotiations where there were strong relationships.

That's the first thing. Then, obviously, there is being able to communicate well in the media, being able to manage the party structures and be respectful of the party's democratic processes, there's having a vision, coupled with determination and drive, which I think are important. A bit like a candidate in a constituency drives the local campaign, it's about driving the party forward together so that people feel part of something good and are motivated and feel as if they know where they're going. I think those are qualities which are important, although I will also say that everybody's different and people lead in different ways. I don't think we should be afraid of that; I don't think we should try and fit our leaders into some kind of identikit mould and say this is the only way to do it.

JLH Do you think having a plan and a vision is an important part of leadership? You said that you thought Charles Kennedy was a good leader – lots of

people do – but he never really had any kind of overall vision or plan; he was good at reacting to circumstances, so he managed to be a good leader without these things.

JS That is interesting because, of course, under Charles's leadership, the real pivotal change in our fortunes came after the Iraq war – and obviously that wasn't planned. It's a truism, but you can never predict what the big issue of the next election will be. In 2001, you would never have predicted that the Iraq war was going to be a big issue in 2005; and in 2005, you wouldn't have predicted that the next election was going to be about the economy. In 2010, you wouldn't have predicted that 2015 would have been about whether or not Labour was going to be in the SNP's pocket. In 2015 you might have predicted that 2017 was going to be about Brexit, but actually it ended up being as much about social care. It's hard to look ahead! So I think rather than a plan which has to change, a vision and a broad strategy are important. And I think you need agility as well, because even if you're the governing party, you can't predict when things like pandemics are going to hit. You do need a kind of a guiding force behind what you're trying to achieve, but if you don't allow yourself agility and the ability to adapt to circumstances, then you're not seeing the full picture. It's a mix of those things.

JLH What are you going to do now and are you going to stay involved in politics?

JS If by politics you mean trying to change the world for the better, you'll not be surprised that

I'm still as determined as ever to create positive change in the world! I have an exciting new job starting in September: I'm going to be director of Partners for a New Economy, which is a group of four philanthropic foundations that come together to make grants to try to change the economic system – everything from trying to look at how our banking and monetary systems work, to how companies can change their behaviour and how we can sow a new thread of academic thinking and foundation for what a different economic system looks like. In lots of different ways the economic system doesn't work: climate change is an obvious example, inequality is another.

I'm also now a visiting professor at Cranfield University in the 'Changing the World of Work' department. I'll be doing various things in that academic role, which is another new world for me.

JLH No more involvement in party politics?

JS I'm focused on making change in different ways. I'm part of the Liberal Democrat family and will obviously always continue to provide guidance and support, particularly to people who are setting out in politics and especially those who are from backgrounds that are under-represented in politics; I'll always be an encouraging voice, trying to help. But I think it's appropriate that whoever our new leader is, they have some space to get on with their job as I get stuck into my exciting new role.

JLH Thanks very much.

Think history

Can you spare some time to help the History Group?

The Liberal Democrat History Group undertakes a wide range of activities – publishing this *Journal* and our Liberal history books and booklets, organising regular speaker meetings, maintaining the Liberal history website and providing assistance with research.

We'd like to do more, but our activities are limited by the number of people involved in running the Group. We would be enormously grateful for help with:

- Improving our website.
- Helping with our presence at Liberal Democrat conferences.
- Organising our meeting programme.
- Publicising our activities, through social media and more traditional means.
- Running the organisation.

If you'd like to be involved in any of these activities, or anything else, contact the Editor, **Duncan Brack** (journal@liberalhistory.org.uk) – we would love to hear from you.

