



GARY GIBBON IN CONVERSATION WITH ED DAVEY SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENERGY & CLIMATE CHANGE 24th September 2012, The Grand, Brighton

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Good afternoon. Welcome, very good to have you here. Particularly good to have Ed Davey here. It really wouldn't be much of an In Conversation without him. And we're going to chat a bit, and I'm going to start by asking you, Ed, about what you were talking about yesterday in your environment speech, so briefly really, wind turbines, but you're not for turning, a novel approach to alternative energy...

Not turning back [laughter]

You seem to be having a pop at perverse critics who are holding up green growth; I'm going to invite you to be more specific about who those critics are...

Well, you can invite me. I think we're winning the argument. The critical thing, I think, on the green agenda is to show that the arguments are with us, and my style of politics is not necessarily to go for the man but to go for the ball.

The man? That helps me a little...

Well the women have been got rid of, but er, I think in terms of playing the game I think we've got industry on our side, I think we've got investors on our side, I think we've got campaign groups on our side, and I think we've got the analysis on our side. And I think that if we use the arguments, I believe we can win over the rest

of the government. Because there's a huge prize here, there's billions of pounds of investment to unlock really soon. That's jobs, that's green growth, and I'm not afraid of taking on people on the argument.

This only works, doesn't it, if you tell us who you're talking about, and given that we've seen some of the email traffic, I'm going to take a punt on George Osborne...

Well, there are people around George Osborne who don't share my analysis, but the thing about the Chancellor you've got to remember, he's going to be judged and held account by his own party, by the people, about how well he delivers growth. And given that energy is so central to growth, I'm delighted the government is really focussing on infrastructure, on building, on housing, and transport. But energy is at the heart of that infrastructure growth opportunity. I'm sure the chancellor wants to grab that with both hands.

And you said being a green growth denier is as bad as being a climate change denier. Do you think he's a climate change sceptic? Is he a total convert, George Osborne?

Well he voted for the climate change act.

I don't think that answers the question.

Only he can answer that.

You sit in a room with him...

I do.

You have the odd correspondence, that we get to see...

I do. I think it's very important that when the fourth carbon budget comes up for review, that we proceed with that. That's really important.

That's the test?

To show that this government, across the coalition, is committed to tackling climate change. I think if we don't proceed with the fourth carbon budget, I think that will be a very very negative sign.

Quick other thing before we come to what turned you into the politician you are today, I just want to ask you about something that was in the mail on Sunday yesterday morning - hands up how many people buy that group of papers? Anyway, we won't go into that - to help you with it, in case you didn't see it, there was an article on page 2 of the mail on Sunday saying you were on the move, already pitching ostensibly at leadership, possibly even on some sort of strict diet to..

Well you can see I'm not on that! Well the thing is, it said the source was one of my friends. I haven't got any friends who speak to the mail on Sunday. So that is, I think, the veracity of that article.

Well let's get back to what turned you into the politician you are today, I want to ask you first of all about childhood, and unlike most of us you had an enormous blow as a young child, something you can even fully have been conscious of, you lost your father at a very young age.

Yep. My father died aged 38; I was four. My mother was widowed in her early thirties with three boys under ten. So that was pretty tough. I can't remember much about my father. I can just remember it being a pretty sad time for my mother

You mother struggles on, bringing you all up, then she's struck with illness?

Yes, she was diagnosed with breast cancer, had a mastectomy, and then a few years later it turned into bone cancer. That was diagnosed when I was 12, and she was ill for three years. And I and my middle brother Henry, we nursed her at home with help from my mother's parents. And that was a very difficult time. She was in great pain. Bone cancer is hugely painful and I used to administer morphine. There's things which involved giving her electric shocks to reduce the pain. It was not a great time. It was a very difficult time, but it obviously influences how I think about life, and what I think, to take one practical example, is the need to support young carers. There are lots of young people that are looking after brothers and sisters or parents that are ill and I don't think they get the support they need and that's what I take from that. We got support, yes, from my mother's parents, we got support from one or two neighbours, but we got very little other support. Fortunately for us we weren't poor, we had a loving family, and that got us through. But I think we could have done with a little bit of extra help, to be honest.

You talk there about what sort of policy it led you to, where does it take you emotionally and as a personality, something like that

First of all I think it makes you see things in proportion. I remember going to school, 13-14, and my friends were worried about this or that, the other, and quite quite difficult to engage with them when I was thinking about my mother at home. So maybe had to grow up a little earlier. I remember after she died I often used to go back to our old house by myself. And just before my O levels and I was thinking 'right, what's motivated me', because previously, like most other children, I worked hard to please my mother, and she was no longer there. So I had to decide, was I going to do whatever I liked, or was I going to knuckle down and work for, I guess, myself. Fortunately I wasn't going to be beaten by that so a bit of competition between brothers kept me on the straight and narrow.

Are you trying to look after yourself before you moved to your grandparents, or your grandparents moved in, as it were?

My middle brother was doing his A levels, and we lived together for a bit. Then he went off for a year off, I went to live with my grandparents. And my eldest brother, in my second year of sixth form, came back from university and he and I lived together. So it was a bit all over the shop.

So you moved to your grandparents, there's this new potential framework, and you're particularly close to your grandfather.

And my grandmother.

And then your grandfather dies...

Yeah, my grandfather died my I was 18, and that's the first time I actually got quite cross. We got used to - we were brought up without a father, got used to my mother, the prospect of her dying and leaving, and she'd talk it through; she was fantastic and engaged about preparing us for what was going to happen. But my grandfather died relatively quickly, and he was leaving his wife - my grandmother - who had lost her own child, was now losing her husband. And I was cross. I'm not quite sure who with, but I was cross.

How did that reveal itself, did you channel it, develop it, get over it?

I don't know. Looking after my grandmother I guess. She was a wonderful lady, and she only died a few years ago, aged 90. She was so kind to us throughout. Trying to give you an idea of her kindness. The best way of describing her, is expressing what she did when she was in the war. My grandfather had gone off to North Africa and Italy and left my grandmother with my young mother, and she took in all these evacuees. And she cared for them an awful lot. And when she died, at her funeral there weren't many family members left and there weren't many friends, because she outlived them, but these evacuees, found out and they came to her funeral, and they talked about Aunty Maudie. Because they had so much affection for the way she'd gone without. She used to give all her rations to the children, and she took up smoking. She was great, my grandmother, she used to say she'd taken up smoking because she'd gone out to hang the washing and a Messerschmitt had swooped down and tried to strafe her. She told very good tall stories. I used to like teasing her, because she used to pretend that she wasn't smoking, because she didn't want me to get into bad habits. She used to go outside and smoke, and when I used to go outside and see her smoking she'd put the cigarette behind her back.

But that is an awful lot of death for someone to cope with at a young age. What impact has that had? Loss and grief and death, very few people have to go through it in prosperous advanced societies.

I think it makes you more self reliant and resilient, determined.

It doesn't make one more prone to being low or anything like that?

It can do. I mean, the truth is, bereavement can affect people at any stage of their life, and it can affect them in many many different ways. I'm the patron of a charity called Jigsaw for you, which tries to help children deal with bereavement and trauma, and the way it does it, it helps children come to terms with it by putting them in touch with other children who've gone through that, to show them that there's a way forward. And so, through being involved with that charity I've noticed that the effects on children can be very very different. The circumstances of bereavement, whether people have a loving family in particular, to nurture them, that can be a critical factor. And of course, also, it can come out in later years, the trauma of grief.

Do you think it did at any point for you?

I don't know. I think I've been lucky cause I've had loving brothers, a very strong relationship with my grandmother, I've had good friends, and that's kept me happy. So I'm not a miserable person.

Your memories aren't very vivid of your father, inevitably, but he was successful solicitor who left enough money for you to go to private school

Yeah, he was from a mining family actually, in north Nottinghamshire, and he went to grammar school, Henry Melsch [?], and then he went to London university, studied law, became a lawyer, was relatively successful in Sutton Ashfield and Kirby in Ashfield, and did very well. IN fact, one of the ways that life can connect you, I had always thought that he was a Conservative, because I remember I think my mother talking about in 1974 that we needed to get the country out of the mess it was in here, and I think she would have voted for Edward Heath. And indeed my first political meeting, this is a big confession, was being dragged along by my eldest brother to a disco. A young conservative disco. I was 12, and he was getting involved in Nottingham young conservatives. So there was that conservative tendency, and I'd heard stories that he'd gone with my uncle les, his brother, to play snooker at the Tory club in Sutton Ashfield. So I sort of assumed he must have been a Tory, then I was looking through a photo album with my grandmother and, it must have been about fifteen years ago, and I found this cutting, from the Sutton and Ashfield gazette or something, and the headline was "only the liberals understand the NHS". This was from the 1950s, and it was about my father. He was speaking to Sutton and Ashfield liberals. You can imagine how I felt. It was a really big moment. I had this connection with my father, who I'd never really known on that level. It was great.

You go to Nottingham school, thanks to your dad. What was that like? Any names we might know, knocking around?

I think you know the answer to that. I went to Nottingham high School, which is a private school, because my father had left money. He must have been a very cautious man; he died at 38 but he left money, ring fenced for our education. And then any money that was left over that we could inherit, we couldn't inherit until we were 25. He obviously didn't trust us. So I was able to go to Nottingham high school, it was a really good school. Really quite important in my life, actually, because I went there from the age of 8-18, so along with my family it was a really stable part. I was there for ten years. And a certain Ed Balls was in the year below me. And actually, it's all my fault, because I lent him my history A-level mags...

And the rest is history?

The rest is history.

Did you get them back?

Of course not, no.

That's not a loan, is it?

Well, he's used to not paying loans back. Aged about 14, history, our history teacher, doctor David Bewtis, who was known as slob. Not very nice. And he remembers he said to me "Davey, Ken Clarke sat in that chair". Because Mr Clarke also went to Nottingham high school, and Geoff Hoon did as well.

Could you tell from the shape of the chair that Ken Clarke was there?

Er, no, but it shows the school in a good light that it's produced politicians from all different parties.

When you arrive at the House Ed Balls is already there..

Not in the house...

Oh no, he's behind the scenes, but did you bump into each other? Was there a stronger connection than the missing history notes?

Not really, no.

And now? Texting?

I don't think I'll be doing that with Mr Balls. No, we've never really struck up any sort of political relationship

Or any other kind.

Or any other kind. I actually would have like him to have engaged when Labour was in office, but I thought the way they often treated us when they were in government was, frankly, arrogant. They weren't, or they didn't appear to be, into

pluralist politics. I think that should be a lesson for us. If they're going to want to engage with our party, they've got to show that they listen and understand our party. If they want to be more credible and progressive politics, they've got to understand pluralist politics. It's there level of arrogance, and their unwillingness even to listen to their own side I think got them into all sorts of trouble

Just coming back to the personal, did he at any point, as the guy that'd been around Whitehall for a while, he didn't reach out the hand? Was he blanking you, snubbing you?

Listen, I got elected in 97 with a majority of 56 votes, much to my surprise. I was number 106 on the target list, so worrying about whether Ed Balls wanted to shake my hand or have a drink with me was the least of my concerns. I wanted to make sure I got returned in subsequent elections. I stayed in Kingston Surbiton quite a lot. The Tories used to say I'd go to the opening of an envelope if there was a photo op in it, which was about right.

University, tell me about that, the hair isn't let down? You're pretty much applying yourself, aren't you?

Well I had a year off between school and university where I went travelling. Went to Spain and tried to learn Spanish, but unlike our leader I didn't fall in love with a Spanish lady. I had a really good year off actually, and then went to university to study politics, philosophy and economics, and I had a good time at university. Initially I thought I'd gone to the wrong place actually, as everyone seemed to be so much more confident, as if they were going to be prime minister the next day or the next Lawrence Olivier and so on, and I just felt slightly out of place. But I realised most of it was bluff actually, and I could bluff better than they could. So I bluffed my way. Actually in terms of what I was doing in terms of politics then, I wasn't a member of a political party. I got involved in a group called Student Ecology Action. And it was called Student Ecology group - for my first bit of spin I got it renamed to Green Action.

It must have been a sensational moment...

It was; you know, they were just writing about it everywhere. But in my year off I'd read Jonathan Porritt 'Seeing Green', I'd read the 'Sane Alternative' by James Robertson, Schumacher and Paul Eakins, all this environmental work. So I really became a committed environmentalist wanted to get into environmental politics. Not the Green Party, I hasten to add, because all they seem to want to do is sit around talking about legalizing dope, which you know, is an interesting conversation

No point talking about it...

I can't go any further. I was more interested in talking about how we created the green society, which probably shows I must have been a very boring fresher.

Or ahead of your time

Or ahead of my time. We had good parties, but I'm not going to tell you about that.

That's what turns the political light on for you, the green environmental stuff, before any of the other policy areas that are pet favourites of...

It was that and also international development.

You share that with Justine Greening...

I don't know whether she studied it. About quarter of my degree that I could opt for, I did international development. I was mainly very influenced by my cousin Peter, who worked in development all his life, most of his life. He worked for Mirage Spokes International [?] and he'd go to different countries, he'd set up primary healthcare clinics which would help women, particularly through education. And his whole rationale about development was bottom up, employ local people and then when it was [inaudible]...foundation, which is to protect the tigers, and a lot of work on tiger conservation. And talking and listening to Peter, he was probably the most influential family member, because he showed me what could be done. So I actually was thinking of going into development and I applied for a grant to study agriculture economics at White College, Kent. And the then ministry for agriculture, fisheries and foods were very wise, and they declined my grant application. So I never went on to study agricultural economics, and ended up applying to an advert in the Guardian for the parliamentary economic researcher to the Social and Liberal Democrats. And I was really surprised that I decided to apply, because I wasn't sure, because in a previous election I thought the Alliance Party wasn't quite sure what it wanted to be. It wasn't a clear, distinct identity, but nevertheless I knew I wasn't Labour and I knew I wasn't Tory. I was keen on the environment and these guys seemed interested in the environment, so I decided to put my application in, and I was absolutely gobsmacked to get an interview, and then gobsmacked to be appointed. So I started working as the parliamentary economics researcher for the party on the 3rd April 1989.

And you're working there, dreaming up ideas like an independent bank of England, things like that, once you're settled in?

I was mainly working for Alan Beith and Paddy Ashdown, who I found completely inspirational. He showed me that, certainly under his leadership, I thought the party had a much clearer liberal identity than it had had in the previous few years, and we worked on a whole range of different things. I thought we brought the

liberal philosophy out much more clearly and so, in terms of the economic policy, we worked on the independent central bank, you're right, also income tax registration, I can, with many other people, claim some sort of paternity to that idea. I think it was really important to show that we had a vision for our public services, but it was a really liberal vision. Looking after the individual, making sure they can realise their potential. It was one of those stand out policies, it wouldn't have happened if Paddy and Alan hadn't really got it though.

You've touched on winning the seat, but just before I ask you about that, I want to ask about the incident at Clapham Junction in 1995, because some people would argue it ties in with some of your formative experiences. You're on the platform, some of you will have been on it just recently on the way down to Brighton, and you're at Clapham on platform 11. It's a night in December, take us through what happened.

Well, I was waiting for the connection, and the train going into Victoria stopped, and just near, the other side of the platform, these people are having a row, and it was a lady and a man, they were having a row, she got out, he got out, he pushed her over, she lay on the platform, he got back onto the train, the train started pulling out, and she went after him. She tried to get on the train as it was pulling out, and she fell between the train and the platform. And everyone started going "ooh ahh ooh ah"; I said well, is anyone doing anything? So I went over...

Take me through, how quickly do you go over? I mean, do you, just like that, is it? And everyone else was just standing there looking in shock?

Yeah, I mean, they wanted to know what happened. I went over and looked there, and she was on the near rail, she was in one piece, and I thought, well we need to get her out and off the lines. So I took my coat off, went down onto the track making sure I wasn't near the live rail and looked at her to see whether there was any first aid; I was a cub scout and an air scout, I could do my first aid, so I was going to see whether I could get her into the recovery position. She was still breathing. I was trying to work out what to do. It was late at night and I looked and I was saying to them "Stop the train, stop the train" and then I noticed that there was a train coming and there was two lights...you know the curve into Clapham Junction, and just made them stop the trains. So I had to take a very split second decision. I had to decide whether to, obviously had to pick her up, to get her out of there, but I calculated, if I got her out of there and put her onto the platform, I'd be left on the rails, which wouldn't have been very clever, so I decided I needed to go over the lines, which I knew wasn't terribly safe. So I picked her up, and I walked over the lines, not touching them, very gingerly. Checking there wasn't a train coming on the other line, on platform 10, and put her on, and then got off. They did actually stop the train about three or four metres from where we were, but I didn't want to wait around to find out.

And did you hear from her, how she did? What happens after that? Did the police turn up?

Yeah, the police were everywhere, and they wanted a statement from me, but I was a little bit shaken up, I have to say. I had quite a lot of blood on my, so I went to my brother's, who lived nearby, to get cleaned up. They said come in two days time so they can take a statement. Never heard from the lady. And that was it, as far as I'm concerned. And then, six months later, this letter drops through my letterbox giving me an award. So I got an award.

And it's British Humane Society, what is it?

British and Royal Humane Society, and it's the transport police award, or something.

Not everybody would do it, and you can see on the platform that day, that not everybody would do it. I don't know if you've heard of this correlation that happens with people that get medals in the military for acts of bravery and heroism and the rest of it, and being orphaned. But there is quite a striking statistical correlation, there's a spike, and some people hearing that may think that you're made of slightly different stuff because of where you came from, and you have to get on with things yourself, things aren't going to happen for you. You haven't particularly analysed it yourself, you just did it?

You could spend hours analysing it, but just get on with life and trying to live it the best way you can.

And that means sitting down with Alan and working on the party's...

Alan was fantastic, I learnt so much from Alan. Alan understands politics like almost no other Lib Dem MP. His ear for how things are is amazing, and it was a real privilege to work for him. And Paddy, but I worked more closely with Alan. He's a brilliant liberal.

Winning Surbiton...just. Tell me about that.

Yeah, well I actually applied to be the PPC in Twickenham, and there was a little race between candidates. I think I'm right in saying Dick Newby, Sarah Luthford, Neil Sherlock, myself and one or two other people fought the seat, because it was going to be a target seat, and I came second. And I think you know who came first for the seat. And I am delighted that he came first. It was the best election to lose, ever. And I think we've heard why, just now. So I was working as a management consultant by then and my friend wanted me to stand and I was getting a bit fed up of my boss actually; one of the rudest people I'd ever met, in the consultancy. So I tried my hand earlier than I'd thought I would, and a certain Ollie Grunder, who's a good friend of mine said why didn't I go for the Kingston and Surbiton seat, and I looked at him and said, I don't think we're going to win that

Ollie, we're 106 on the target list, and he said, oh you know, have a go. So I got the nomination, and that was an interesting nomination selection campaign, because Mark Oaten [?] was in it, but that's...he was applying somewhere else as well, so that's...I won the votes. And then, no one expected us to take it seriously. In fact, local councillors told me it was a three tying seat. But there was a wonderful lady called Belinda Ayrebrook, who if anyone knows Belinda Ayrebrook, she unfortunately died in 2007. She was prepared to take the seat seriously. She and I agreed we would imagine we were a target seat, even though we weren't, and do everything that target seats were told to do, go out and recruit members, all the rest of it. Initially there was just a few of us; about three or four. Gradually some of the other councillors and activists said ooh, they're going out a lot, maybe we should join them. We made it fun; we used to go to the pub, the bowling alley. We just got a group going, created that buzz and excitement. It actually helped, because I was flying around the world a bit as a management consultant, so I'd come back on a Friday night, go straight from Heathrow or Gatwick out canvassing, campaign the weekend, and then fly out Sunday night or Monday morning. I decided I needed someone to iron my shirts, so I got a cleaner, some people get married, my wife's in the audience...

Not any more!

I hasten to add, I've always done my ironing. She helps me out a bit now. But anyway, I needed a cleaner and we'd got this excitement going. Johnny Oates, who you may know, was my agent in '97, and something happened there, I'm not quite sure what it was. We tried to get excitement in the campaign and we analysed the demographics. Kingston Surbiton is a highly educated position seat, some analysis had more graduates than any [inaudible] in the UK, than a university in Scotland. The fact we were campaigning so hard on education, on paying income tax and education, was a really good position. And someone came out with a strap line, Ed for Education, which is pretty basic. We did a teaser in the run up to the election; we hired a shop in Surbiton high st. We blanked it out and first of all we put "Ed..." and all these people walking past going "Ed, what's that?", then "Ed for..." the next week, and people are going oh, and starting talking about it, and then "Ed for Education", and then the Liberal Democrats, and suddenly you could see people were really interested. And from not really taking us seriously, we began to get interest. There were a whole range of reasons why we won. It was a long campaign; remember the '97 campaign was very long. We just worked and worked and worked. I didn't really expect to win, I have to be honest with you, and I didn't expect to win with the Labour vote going up. The Tory votes fell so much. But I was sitting at home after the polls closed. Belinda phoned me up and said come to the hall, sat me down with Johnny and said you've lost by about 3000 votes. Great result but sorry you've lost. I painted on my smile and went round the counting. Then Johnny came to me at about twenty past two and said, Ed there's going to be a recount, and I said, oh, has Labour lost its deposit? No, no, you're

ahead. I was stunned. I was ahead by something like 258 votes. And then there was another recount, and another recount, by which stage I was only 56 votes ahead. But it had been 58 and 56 and the returning officer was getting a bit fed up because it was now nearly 5 0; clock in the morning. All I could see was Johnny Oates going “declare, declare, declare”, and the Tories going “recount, recount, recount”, but they declared.

I'll come back to what you do when you're in parliament, but you mentioned your wife there, it's a good moment to say that you married seven years ago, and two years later you have a son, John. I wondered if you could tell us a little bit about John?

Not about Emily?

Well people know Emily...

I'll talk about John. He's my joy. He's five in November, but he has a few difficulties. We thought he had cerebral palsy, but we now think it may be something else. They're doing some tests at Great Ormond Street, but he can't walk or talk, but he can understand you, be careful. And he's got a mean sense of humour, and he's fantastic. But it's a challenge, and Emily obviously has to bear most of that challenge because I'm a little busy.

How many hours a day care and attention?

Once he was diagnosed and we thought it was Cerebral Palsy, he was about 12 months. And we were offered a waiting list of physiotherapy of 7 months, speech and language of 12 months and occupational therapy of 12 months. And we said, thanks but no thanks and we did a little private physio but we looked around and discovered the Peto Institute in Budapest. So 6 weeks after he was diagnosed, we were in Budapest - and suddenly we found some people who knew how to handle John and so we go back to Peto an awful lot -they have conductors because its conductive education that Mr Peto developed and Emily sort of learned what they do and writes programmes and everyday we massage him for about three quarters of an hour. And then we do these exercises, well Emily does. I occasionally help out and its all to keep him strong. Because he cant move, his arms, his muscles wouldn'y develop so you have to move him for himself otherwise he's just going to get rigid like many children do with similar conditions.

And so, he's quite a strong little lad. And emily's taught him to crawl - he can now crawl. She spent two years almost breaking her back teaching him how to crawl and he can now crawl.

And the hope is?

We don't know. We just don't know. But he's got determination and one of the things, when I was reading about cerebral palsy children is people write off

cerebral palsy children because they can't speak, they think they are stupid. And I guess with many other conditions, where disabled people get written off because they can't speak...We must never let that happen. I would never let anyone write off my son.

Back to parliament. You're in there, an MP - what do you think of it all? Is it like Hogwarts? Or Oxford? Tell me about it.

It's a bit like public school in a way - you get your locker and your key, and they more or less tell you where matron is if you're not feeling very well.

And I was a researcher, so I'd worked round the houses and it was very odd coming back as an MP. I went to this policeman in my first week and I said: "Can I go down here?" cause as a researcher you couldn't go everywhere and he said: "Sir, its your house." And I thought, Oh OK, things have changed.

There are some bizarre rules - in the cloakrooms, you have some pink ribbons to hang your sword in. I hang my sword diligently every day and there are a few quaint things like that.

It's a working environment and yes there are some little traditions which I actually quite like that you have to get used to it, but you're there to do a job.

The party goes through a considerable amount of leaders whilst you're an MP - you had Paddy Ashdown, who you really quite admired. Then Charles Kennedy and things went a bit wrong and you and a small group decide that actually things have been going wrong for too long.

This was without doubt, the most difficult part of my political career because I hugely admired Charles. He was brilliant for this party in so many ways. His leadership on Iraq was of course historic. And a very courageous decision. So you know we all admired him, he could communicate like no other politician in modern politics. I had immense loyalty and affection for him. But for quite a number of years, and if people read Greg Hurst's book which documents this, we were all really torn because a number of us knew his problem and we covered for him for a number of years. Because we thought it was the best thing for the party, we were loyal to him and we wanted him to get better and we were told he would get better and he tried to get better. But he didn't get better... there came a point where your conflict between loyalty for Charles and what he had done for the party and Charles on a good day was the best communicator. It was being torn by the impact of his problems on the party, whether you were being negligent with the party that we love and had worked so hard for. All the people round the country who just work day in, day out for the party. Knowing that our leader had this really difficult problem and you know we talked about it, we kept quiet - if you read the book many people think that we should have done things earlier -but we wanted to help him -that's what you should do as a liberal. But it became

almost impossible. There were enough of us that wanted to sort things out. Actually, we wanted to sort things out without him going.

To give him a break?

Yes but it proved impossible.

But it came down to 3 of you in the end.

There were 4 of us.

Sarah Teather, David Laws, Norman Lamb, it's all in the book

Very difficult?

It's horrible hated every minute of it, had sleepless nights and I'm not proud of it but I think someone had to put the party first.

You mentioned Paddy Ashdown, Lib-Lab-ery. You didn't like it, presumably because it wasn't equidistant?

No because Blair had won massive majority. He was just stringing us along, which is what he did. I could understand what Paddy had been doing and I agree with him on almost everything and wanted him to remain our leader....on strategy he was fantastic.

But Lib-labb-ing never made sense to me after Labour got his huge majority. We could argue from the opposition benches for the things that we'd been talking about...but being brought into government into cabinet committee looked like we were doing more than arguing for our case, it looked like we had been sucked in. I think that could have gone on much longer - it would have been difficult.

We shared an awful lot with Labour in that early period the first period of that parliament, so we could work but I just didn't think we needed to be suckered in, and I think it meant that we couldn't have been as critical as we needed to be and meant that we couldn't keep our identity.

We know the challenges in this coalition now - how important it is to keep our identity. I think in a way, it's a bit easier with Conservative than it would have been Labour in 1997 because maybe at this particular moment in time, there are a number of issues.

But I think it was right at the time to step back from this pre-1997 cosying up.

Equidistance though, is something you think the party must maintain when it comes to say, the next General Election campaign?

I think equidistance is a word that has had its day.

Have you got a better one?

Yes, Liberal Democrats. Two words. We've got to focus on us and not worry about others. What do we stand for? Positive. Our agenda. It's so strong, so relevant, I think it could be so popular. Just focus on us, don't worry about others.

The voters might change and you could argue that they're operating under a biased media that's leading them up the garden path, but there is a perception that your current leader leans more one way than the other and the opinion polls don't dispute that.

Listen, I thought Nick handled it better than any other party leader at the last election. He made it simple, very clear. He said "I will listen to how people vote and I will respect their vote." And that's what he did. He said that before the election... and that's what we should do this time. And let the people decide how many votes they want to give to other parties and then the parties will have to sort it out if it's a balanced parliament with no overall majority.

I think he did it brilliantly in the last election and should keep to this recipe this time.

When I chatted to MPs and said we'd be having this conversation...there's a pattern when you're talking about where people are in the party, and people say, "Oh, he's a bit social democrat", "Oh he's a liberal" and quite a few said of you "oh, actually he is a bit social democrat"

Really?

And that you had some little social democrat tendencies, some Stasi stuff. The way you reacted even tells us something. There is this weird division in the party still, isn't there...where did you come from? Where do your ideas spring from?How do you react to issues in front of you?

I wasn't a member of either previous party. I probably would have been a member of the liberal party but I thought the social democrats brought huge benefits to the lib dems. And we must never forget the social democrat traditions. and I think they are relevant to the problems of today. But I think it's the combination of the two that makes our party so relevant and so powerful, blended together before in the alliance they were kept separate and there were tensions, and I think we've got over that, we've got past that.

You must hear it as much as I do, the little sneering remark - oh he's still a social democrat. The implication is that certain people reach for the state, haven't weaned themselves off it and other people instinctively throw a sheet over it.

Come on. There are liberals who reach for the state as well, and I just think there's far too much can be made of that. One of the reasons why we should reject that type of analysis is that our party is united. Ours is one of the only parties that is united

You've seen it today, you've talked to people. Despite all of the challenges of the coalition, we've stayed united. You know, you guys try to find an MP to speak against Nick - they can't find one.

I think in the other parties, they can find MPs to speak against their leaders. I don't want

Well, that will be a measure of success when we find them then?

No, that will be a measure of how unusual that MP is, would she or he exist which they don't. I think - I don't want to look at entrails of history to create false divisions. I think 2 philosophies have come together. I said to you, I'd probably be a liberal on balance. The Liberal flame burns in my heart.

One of my friends in the party was the late Conrad Russell. He partly helped get Emily and I together so particularly fond of him. He wrote this great book on liberalism which I recommend to everybody. And I wanted to do a final chapter on liberalism and the environment with him, but unfortunately he died before we could get round to that. But for me, that's what burns in my heart, but I don't think using the state in certain circumstances can be described as illiberal. Sometimes the state can be very liberating and you've just got to pick it right.

Where should we think of you? I know you said its one homogenous party...

We're not homogenous. I said united.

OK, united sorry. The Mail on Sunday article has a few potentially confusing lines saying that you were a right winger desperate to get into bed with the labour party.

Well, the Mail on Sunday was completely and utterly confused and not for the first time.

That's an easy win here isn't it! Where are you, everybody has got a place -are you a true orange booker or a sort of orange booker on the fringes.

I don't know what these labels mean!

Well you wrote the book.

Yeah, but it's a chapter in a book.

It was an important book.

Yes, it was an important book but let's be clear, I believe in market forces and competition, and liberal free enterprise, I think is really important. I don't think the state should run our industries and make our bread and make our cars.

I don't think we were statist in a labour, socialist type way ever.

You were seen as to the left of the labour party on some issues.

Well, yes, on some issues because we wanted to invest in education in the 90's when labour were too timid to recognise you had to put up taxed, that made us left wing. Labour was too timid and afraid of the media and afraid of their own principles. What did labour do when they got into power, they raided taxed to invest in public services. So we led that debate and I don't think that makes us more left wing than the labour party, it just means we were more honest.

Let me ask you about where the tories are - do they look like the party they were when you first shook hands in 2010? Do you think the modernisation actually happened?

There's been some, I think the issue we have with our conservative colleagues is that they are not all united around what is sometimes called the detoxification strategy. Some of them want to remain toxic.

But do you think the leadership has slightly given up on what we thought was Cameroonism and modernisation? Maybe because its sniffing something in the opinion polls - do you think they're on a journey away from where they were in 2012?

I think there's a debate going on in the tory party and its not settled. Different times, different places, you hear different voices speaking more loudly than others. I don't want to trespass on their internal arguments. What I will say is that they've signed a coalition agreement and they've got to stick to it.

Well, that's going to get harder and harder if they are on a journey. You can already see that david Cameron and George Osborne feel as if they've got to throw some red meat to their people.

They've got some party management to do. I think that's obvious to everyone.

Do you think they've done it well?

I think they've had some challenges

You're being very diplomatic.

I am being diplomatic, I think it's important because I want the coalition to work. And this is going to sound a bit sanctimonious, and Ashdown like but its in the country's interest that it works - that's really serious.

And therefore, I think at a party conference you'd expect some jokes and I thought Vince's jokes were fantastic. I wish I'd had them. But I think you've also got to make sure that you can do business and I want to focus in on the arguments. Now you sometimes the media want to write about fights. I don't think that's actually helpful. I want to persuade conservative colleagues who aren't immediately of our disposition to see the true light. So you know, let's look at the issues in my area.

Take Shale Gas. I want to explain to the Conservatives that a. shale gas isn't the answer to everything b. that I'm not in principle against it, it can be done safely for the environment then there's no reason why we shouldn't do it...but c. think about what that will mean in the shire counties where the shale gas is. And do they think that that will be different public reaction than the reaction you've had from onshore windfarms. I suggest it might not be. So, this hype around shale gases both incorrect around implications it will have for gas prices, all the independent research shows that even if you use shale gas all around the world, it wouldn't change the direction of travel of gas prices, because of the huge demand for gas is going up and up and up. So the shale gas wouldn't change energy policy, what it would do if we decide to go for it and I'm not saying we shouldn't but if we do, it will create some problems in some of the constituencies where exploration takes place. And if anyone's under any illusions, or unsure about that, go talk to conservative MP Mark Menezes where the shale gas drilling is happening, he's had a bit of a reaction in his constituency and it makes the reaction to onshore windfarms look like a consensual picnic. There are huge issues- that some people skirt over as if they don't matter.

Quickfire questions

Has Nick Clegg ever said to you that if Chris Huhne isn't charged, that he might want the job back?

No he hasn't.

You wouldn't necessarily surrender it?

I think you know the answer to your own question.

Orange or yellow. This is quickfire

Orange

Ah, orange. Pleb or Posh.

Pleb

Vince or Nick.

Nick.

Thank you Ed Davey.

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