ANDREW MARR SHOW, SIR VINCE CABLE, 4TH FEB 2018

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SIR VINCE CABLE, MP
Leader, Liberal Democrats

Am: This spring marks the 30th year of the Liberal Democrats, people keep talking these days about a new centre third force in British politics but they don’t generally mean the Lib Dems. Why not? In the latest of our Leader interviews, Sir Vince Cable joins me now.

AM: Sir Vince, can I start by reading you something one of your predecessors, Paddy Ashdown said recently? He said that, talking about the Conservatives. “A Corbyn government after this lot is now completely unavoidable unless the centre gets its act together and does an en marche. It happens by creating a people’s movement. Macron is the model.” Do you agree with that?

VC: Party. I think that defines both the threat to Britain from the extremes and the opportunity for people who have sensible middle ground opinion, but of course we’re not France, we have a different voting system, but I think that the political upheaval that we’re going to get this year in the wake of Brexit, that does indeed present major opportunities and the Liberal Democrats are there, you know. We’re a well established party, we’ve got record levels of membership, it’s expanding. It’s younger than even the Labour Party in its demographic and we’re doing well on the ground. Local by elections all over the place.

AM: But not quite, according to Paddy. Because he was then asked, so who is going to be the British Macron, and we all thought he’s say well it’s Vince Cable, obviously. But he didn’t. He said this. He said, ‘where is the British Macron? Well, there isn’t one,’ he said.’ I was saying to someone the other day that John the Baptist has arrived, the public is hungry but Jesus Christ won’t
turn up.’ He doesn’t seem to have faith in the Liberal Democrats as that third force.

VC: Well I’m certainly not claiming to be Jesus Christ, but I am leading a party which is fundamentally right and united and clear on the big issue of the day, which is Brexit, and we are winning the public argument which is essentially that we have a vote on the final deal. And I’m very comfortable that we are in the right place. I’m currently trying to press the Labour Party and Jeremy Corbyn in particular, to come out and support this position which most of his supporters wish to have.

AM: When you became Leader you said that you were going to bring some big ideas and rejuvenate the party. What’s your biggest idea? Apart from Brexit. We’ll take about Brexit in a moment, putting that to one side what’s your biggest idea?

VC: Well tomorrow we will be launching our views on health. We’re drawn on 10 extremely high level people who have former experience in the health service. We’re going to be presenting a set of proposals which relate to the financial needs of the health service, we all know how critical its problems are and put it on a sustainable basis. I think a lot of people will find that package very attractive.

AM: Are you going to ask for a different kind of taxation to fund the health service, because if you’re not then it’s what everybody else is saying?

VC: Well it’s actually not what everybody else is saying. I’ll be setting out the details tomorrow, but it is indeed built around the idea that we have to have a dedicated form of taxation and I’ll be describing it tomorrow.

AM: An earmarked tax of some kind for the NHS?
VC: That principle and indeed there are serious people around who not necessarily in my party who are arguing for that approach.

AM: Well I grant you that is certainly interesting. Now you talked about Brexit before that. The trouble is that if you look at the polling, and John Curtis, who is the guru of all of these things certainly says this, people are not changing their minds about Brexit, there is no great buyer’s remorse and there is no great drive in the country for a second referendum.

VC: Well I think you’re wrong on the second. You’re right on the first. Certainly the polling does suggest that people haven’t really moved a great deal on Remain/Brexit. There is a bit of a shift to remain. There is a very clear move – I mean all the polls show this – to people feeling that first of all the government’s making a terrible mess of the negotiations and is horribly disunited, and also supporting the idea of a vote on the final deal. I think that is getting a lot of traction and that will be crucial.

AM: There’s a lot of support for a vote on the final deal in the House of Commons but a second referendum’s of course a step beyond that. You have a dozen MPs. The Labour Leader sitting in that chair last week was very clear that he’s against a second referendum and will stay so. The Tories are against a second referendum, therefore in practical terms it is a dead duck, isn’t it?

VC: No.

AM: How does it not become a dead duck?

VC: I think Jeremy Corbyn is actually crucial to this. I mean it is clear that the vast majority of his MPs and of his party and of his supporters are very concerned about the fact that he hasn’t opposed Brexit. He’s effectively worked in collusion with Theresa
May and her government to enable Brexit to happen. I think there is a simmering anger about that and I think as we get through this year and we come closer to the final decision and is it becomes clear, as it is I think, that we’re going to get a very bad deal from these negotiations, he will be under enormous pressure to agree to support a referendum on the final deal. And I think the Labour Party will come round to it, as will a significant number of dissident Conservatives.

AM: Well we’ll see. Jeremy Corbyn seems very clear that he won’t. But even so it seems pretty clear, it’s hard to imagine how we will not formally leave the EU in March next year. It’s quite close now and I’m just wondering what happens to the Lib Dems after that. Do you become the Return Party?

VC: Well, I don’t accept it’s inevitable. I think actually this debate

AM: It’s highly likely though.

VC: The probability is that it will happen but there is a significant possibility that it won’t. But, as I explained to you earlier, we’re not just an anti-Brexit party, we have a wide range of policies, quite apart from the issues on health. I’ve been setting out in recent months our views about extreme inequalities of wealth and how you deal with them. I focused on homelessness over the Christmas period and how we’re going to deal with that. So we’re a broadly based party with a Liberal Democratic agenda and that will develop whether or not Brexit happens.

AM: But if Brexit does happen will you then be a party campaigning for us to return to the EU?

VC: Well, returning to the EU once Britain has left, if we do leave, would be much more difficult than staying in.
AM: So not necessarily?

VC: Not necessarily, no it isn’t. There’s a whole set of additional hurdles that you would have to cross if you wanted to rejoin and I think we’d have to rethink the position at that stage. But as I say, it’s not inevitable. I think there is quite a high possibility that this whole extremely damaging process can be stopped.

AM: Are you enjoying the job?

VC: Yes, I am.

AM: Really?

VC: Indeed, yes. No, I – I think you may have forgotten but a year ago I was out of work; I was going round book festivals promoting my novel. I was preparing for a dancing tour. A: Having a wonderful life, a wonderful life.

VC: A year later, I’m back leading a party and AM: A wonderful life.

VC: No, look I’ve been in politics in some form for you know over half a century and then I –

AM: And you’ve got the job that you’ve always wanted. But a little bit like your friend Ming Campbell, or your other friend Gordon Brown, perhaps not at the right moment. Perhaps it’s come slightly too late when the party’s in the doldrums and it’s very hard to turn it round.

VC: Well I think the timing issue is right, but not in the way you mean. I mean I’m very fortunate actually that I’m in this position at probably one of the moment important turning points of British political history and I and my party have an opportunity to be an absolutely critical player in all of that. So actually yes, I am happy to be here.
AM: We assume the next election will be in 2022, will you be leading the Liberal Democrats at that point?

VC: Yes, that was my intention. I made it very clear that I was here for the duration. I mean one of the problems is because we have no idea when the next election will be. The fixed term parliament rule suggests it may go four and a half years, it could well be sometime next year if the current upheavals and bloodletting in the Tory Party get out of control, but we don’t know. I’m prepared for any eventuality.

AM: Sir Vince Cable, as always a pleasure to talk to you.

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