AM: The Liberal Democrats have experienced a pretty devastating reversal of fortune but their new-ish leader Tim Farron insists that Liberalism has a bright future. So how is the fightback going? He joins me from his constituency in south Cumbria. Good morning, Mr Farron.

TF: Morning, Andrew.

AM: Now, it’s reported in today’s papers the Liberal Democrats are looking at having shortlists for seats of only ethnic minorities or only gay people or only disabled people. Is that accurate?

TF: Well, the Liberal Democrat conference in March will be looking at a range of possibilities and it’s all about trying to make sure that those people who represent us in the various parliaments and assemblies around the UK and in Europe reflect the diversity of the communities that are out there. I think, let’s be honest, you mentioned the number of MPs that we have, every single one of them is a white male, and I’m somebody who thinks you’ve got to do this in a liberal way, but I’m also somebody who says you can’t turn your back on the fact that we’ve clearly not succeeded as a party, at the top at least, in reflecting that diversity. So it’s good to look at those options. But the thing about the Liberal Democrats, as all our new members are finding out is we are very, very democratic and the leader doesn’t get to tell people exactly what they do. So I’m very interested in some of these movies and very supportive of and determined to get a much more diverse representation in the party. But the party conference and members will make that decision.
AM: But this is a new level of positive discrimination. We haven’t seen it before, so I am interested in your view. I mean, under this proposal, for instance, if you want to represent the Liberal Democrats from south Manchester or wherever, you might have to be gay or transgender. Is that really liberal?

TF: No, if you look – a couple of things: first of all we’ve – there’s lots for us to learn at the moment from our – our friends and comrades over the water in Canada, the Liberal Party there, who had a very similar problem, and twice over, I should say. They were hammered into a very poor position in an election a few years ago and they rebuilt and they’re now back in government with a majority. They also had an issue with diversity and, frankly, too many white blokes and not enough of everything else. And so they had a quite inventive idea of grouping constituencies together where in four constituencies you’d have to make sure that at least one of them selected someone from the black or minority ethnic background, and two would be women and so on. But these are not things that are diktats, these are things we’re discussing in our conference in March. I think the reality is – you were hinting earlier on really – if you look at all our candidates at the last general election we were probably just about as diverse as anybody else. The problem the Liberal Democrats have had, even when we’ve had bigger numbers of MPs, is actually getting those people elected, and I think that is the thing that I need to focus on.

AM: Is this idea of black and ethnic minority in itself not a bit offensive, it’s been suggested this week? For instance, what about Chinese people, what about Korean people and so forth? Don’t you need to break – if you want real diversity don’t you need to break it down much more?

TF: Well, these are things we’ll be discussing, and I think it’s right that we do so. It’s also right to remember that you get the
balance right, because of course, you know, setting a diktat is not
the right way of doing these things. But you know, let’s be honest
and give some credit, the Labour Party in the mid-1990s, they
took some muscular action when it came to gender equality and
actually –

AM: And it’s worked for them.

TF: - to be fair to them, back then, I think they changed the –
they changed the nature of the House of Commons, and other
parties have followed suit. So I think –

AM: Would you like – sorry.

TF: I’m a liberal, but I think if there’s inequality then you should
step in and try and sort it out.

AM: Would you like to trump them by being the first party with a
trans MP?

TF: I think – it’s not about trumping anybody, it’s about making
sure you represent properly and reflect the diversity of the society
we live in, and for certain 50 per cent of – maybe even more than
50 per cent of the people in United Kingdom are women, and the
fact that they’re so underrepresented and that we have no women
MPs amongst the eight that we have is something that I find, you
know, frankly embarrassing, and it doesn’t – it’s not right. So it’s
important that we intervene and get things right, not to be able to
make a point to other parties, but just to do the right thing.

AM: Now, one of your other great crusades as a party has always
been the EU. What do you make of David Cameron’s negotiation?
You must sometimes be quite pleased with it, think he’s done
quite well.
TIM FARRON

TF: Well, I think, I mean, I’m supportive of there being a renegotiation and I’m supportive of him getting something that he feels he can come back to the Tory Party, and more importantly the British people, and sell. I think it’s interesting, the conversations that we’ve had this morning, both on this matter and with Douglas Carswell talking about the various different branches of the Leave campaign, they both kind of ignore the main thing, because I don’t think most people who will be making their mind up in the referendum will make it up on the basis of the detail of David Cameron’s referendum or the personnel involved in the campaigns. What they will do is look at the big, big questions. That’s what frustrates me, that’s what we want to be talking about. You know, is it in Britain’s interest to be inside or outside the world’s biggest market? In these really dangerous and quite frightening times is it better to seek the security of being alongside your closest friends and neighbours? And when you’re dealing with enormous global crises, challenges, and the economy, refugee crisis, climate change, are we better off doing it together with others or on our own? And I say that list because that’s really the – those are the big, lofty issues on which most people will make their mind up, and not really the kind of fairly grainy detail of what David Cameron comes back from Brussels with.

AM: You’ve been very critical of the prime minister in terms of the number of refugees this country has taken so far. What is the right number in your view, roughly?

TF: Well, it’s a lot more than none. A lot more than none.

AM: So is it about a million like Germany?

TF: First of all, the figure that I have given him – well, the figure that I have given him and asked for repeatedly is that he takes 3,000 orphaned refugees from the camps within Europe. It’s
important to look at this in two ways. One, and most importantly, is on the humanitarian side. I mean, Josef Stalin once, you know, rather chillingly said that one death is a tragedy and a million is a statistic. And I’m afraid I think the prime minister and other European leaders potentially are treating this as a set of statistics. And - in other words, looking at the scale of the problem and not looking at the humanitarian reality. You know, people I’ve met on the beach in Lesbos, people with children I met in the camp at Calais, and these people are not on the whole, you know, coming here as economic migrants, these are people fleeing from war and persecution and Europe has what, I think in 2014 have 190,000 refugees, that was a record since the Second World War. This last year, 2015, it was a million refugees, it could be three million this year and even that’s only, what, a fifth, a quarter of those who are fleeing from the conflicts in and around the Middle East. So the scale of the problem is massive and our prime minister is not taking action.

AM: Tim Farron, thank you very much indeed for joining us this morning.

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