AM: Sir Vince, let’s start with your own position. Again, you are somebody who is now calling for a second referendum. You’ve just heard Chuka Umunna saying there isn’t time for a second referendum before the October deadline. How do you get round that?

VC: I think we get round it as follows. The government’s going to bring the Withdrawal Bill before parliament and what we’ve said is that if they attach a confirmatory referendum to it, we will support it. And I think it’s quite likely that we will get the referendum we’re fighting for so we can argue for stopping Brexit. We’ve talked to the government about the practicalities and it can be done before October.

AM: You’ve had a long record in the Liberal Democrats of being in favour of a second referendum but you yourself used to be very firmly and vociferously against it. Again, I want to play you something you said back in 2016 in the very same week that the Lib Dems adopted the policy.

Sir Vince Cable

Speaking in September 2016

There are a lot of people in the party who don’t accept the outcome, who feel incredibly angry about it. Who feel it’s reversible and feeling the public got it wrong for whatever reason and somehow we can undo it. And I don’t, I just don’t agree with that actually. I don’t think you can say that.

We should never have had the referendum in the first place, the whole series of blunders which led to this, but you know the public have voted and I do think it is seriously disrespectful and
politically utterly counterproductive to say sorry guys, you got it wrong, we’re going to try again. I don’t think you can do that.

AM: You were right then. Seriously disrespectful and politically counterproductive and that’s your policy in these elections.
VC: Indeed. I said that then and I think I was right to say that then. I was strongly opposed to just rerunning the last referendum. We’re now talking about having a referendum on the terms of Brexit. We now know in a way that we didn’t know then what Brexit entails or what it doesn’t entail and I’ve been very, very clear that since I became leader and you asked me about two years ago –
AM: I’m sorry to break in. That is exactly what Tim Farron was talking about at the time. So you were opposing something that is happening you are now proposing now. Tim Farron was very clear at the time. “We want the people to decide not a rerun of the referendum, he said, not a rerun of the referendum but a referendum on the terms of the as yet unknown Brexit deal.” And that was what you opposed on the day that he proposed it.
VC: Well, I’d understood the argument to be about rerunning the referendum and I didn’t think we should do that and I think now we know more about Brexit – we’ve had two and a half years of disastrous negotiation – we’re now confronted with the possibility of a no deal which would be catastrophic for the country, it’s absolutely clear that no Brexit is where we should be going. Liberal Democrats are campaigning in these elections to stop Brexit. We’re completely united and unambiguous, the public are getting behind us and I think we will.

AM: What’s your view of simply revoking Article 50 as Chuka Umunna has suggested?
VC: Well, it may come to that. I mean if we get to Oct –
AM: Really?
VC: If we get to October and there hasn’t been any resolution of the issue we may come to that, but it’s not the best outcome.
AM: Would that not be an outrageous way of dealing with this situation, that parliament simply cancels the result of the 2016 referendum and says it’s void, we don’t agree with you?

VC: Well it wouldn’t be outrageous but it would be unsatisfactory. We got into this mess as a result of having a referendum in the first place and that’s the only satisfactory way of getting out of it.

AM: So given that Change are more vociferous than you are on that subject aren’t they the real anti-Brexit party?

VC: No. We are the stop Brexit party but we believe in doing it in a proper and democratic way.

AM: Well let’s talk about one of the really big issues around all of this which is free movement. Your manifesto talks about cherishing free movement. Yet again you said in 2017, a little bit latter than the previous clip, you said: “I have serious doubts that EU free movement is tenable or even desirable. The economics are ambiguous, I do not see much upside in Brexit, but one is the opportunity for a more rational immigration policy.” Why have you changed your mind?

VC: Well, I believe in principle that free movement is absolutely right, but there have been negatives about immigration. A lot of people feel very strongly about it. And what is abundantly clear is that within the single market, within the European Union, individual countries can bring brakes on immigration if they feel it’s damaging to their economies. Many other countries do it. We should be staying within the European Union and arguing for that.

AM: You’re rising in the polls at the moment but isn’t there a danger of people breathing new life into a party which brought us through austerity? Huge cuts, 25% cuts in local government spending, £22 billion out of welfare and 17,000 fewer police officers.

VC: I think now people look back they see that period as one of strong and stable government after the financial disaster and
we’ve had three years of chaos since under the Conservatives. So I think a lot of people are now reappraising that period. And we acted as a massive restraint on the Tories over things like public expenditure. It could have been far worse as we now know it is.

AM: You’re the only party in these elections bringing over EU officials to campaign for you. Guy Verhofstadt has been one of them and you may have seen the film that the BBC put out, behind the scenes. And some of his, his own aides said this about the UK. They were joking, I’m sure: “We’ve got to get rid of them.” That’s us. “We’ve finally turned them into a colony and that was our plan from the first moment.” Aren’t you embarrassed about people who hold those kind of views campaigning for the Liberal Democrats?

VC: No, those views are unacceptable and I made it very clear they’re unacceptable. I greeted Guy Verhofstadt when he came to London. He’s the leader of the Liberal family within the European parliament and a good colleague. But we disagree on certain things. He didn’t say those, that was actually his staff. But no, there were disrespectful things said about the Prime Minister which I disagreed with.

AM: Okay. Talking about disrespectful things and propriety in politics, this is also the first manifesto whose title I cannot read out on Sunday morning television. Do you not feel a little bit embarrassed about the coarseness of your main election slogan?

VC: Well, few people objected to it. I looked up the etymology of Bollocks for Brexit and the first thing I read was –

AM: I apologise to people for that.

VC: It was a word with a long and distinguished history going back to the 18th century meaning nonsense.

AM: It’s a also a profanity that we don’t normally use in political discourse. Aren’t you slightly embarrassed?

VC: I’m not in the least bit embarrassed. It made it absolutely clear that we’re about stopping Brexit. That’s what we are.
Unambiguous and honest and I think that conveys it as well as anything else.

AM: If in these elections most voters back the pro-Brexit parties, either the Brexit Party itself or UKIP or indeed the Conservatives and so on then that is a majority for Brexit. That is really the end of the argument. This should be treated as another referendum I put it to you on Brexit and if Nigel Farage’s lot and other parties aligned with them win this then that’s it, over. Argument finished.

VC: Absolutely not. No this is not a referendum. There are several different parties on both sides of the argument and we don’t know where the Labour Party is. They’ll probably get a fair vote. We don’t know whether they’re pro Brexit or against it. They say different things in different places. So you can’t draw that kind of conclusion. We need a proper referendum that will come to a resolution of this issue in which remain is one of the options in the ballot paper.

AM: Very briefly, you said that you were going to stand down as Liberal Democrat Leader sometime in May. It’s now the 19th of May, May is running out. Is that still the case that you’re going to stand down this month?

VC: Well I’ve made it very clear there will be a new Leader in the summer. I’m moving on, I’m not changing my mind about that and I think my successor will inherit a very strong Liberal Democrat Party. We’re now back in politics big time as a major challenge to established parties.

Ends