ANYWAY, the Liberal Democrats, in sunshine, are in Bournemouth this week for their annual conference. No jokes about fitting into a phone-box because despite having only 8 MPs the party says it’s signed up 20,000 new grassroots members since the General Election wipeout. What’s more, the new Lib Dem Leader Tim Farron claims he’s acting as an agony aunt – agony uncle surely – to distressed Labour politicians following Jeremy Corbyn’s victory. Can this really be true? Mr Farron joins us now from the conference centre. Good morning to you, agony uncle.

TIM FARRON:
Good morning, Andrew.

ANDREW MARR:
Now I have to say that when you put this to Labour MPs, there is kind of hoots of derision. They don’t believe that many Labour MPs have been in touch with you. Can I ask you how many have actually contacted you directly?

TIM FARRON:
Oh you can ask and it’s a number, but I think it would be unfair to them to go any further into that.

ANDREW MARR:
(over) Below two?

TIM FARRON:
What does matter, I think is … No more than that. What I think is important is that the developments over the last couple of weeks mean that there is now only one party in British politics that believes in social justice and economic credibility and that is the Liberal Democrats. And against all the odds, after what was a difficult election for us in May to say the least, we have a situation where we are more relevant than perhaps anybody would have predicted and we’re here in Bournemouth in beautiful weather and in surprisingly good form. We’ve got 20,000 new members, which is an increase in about a third of our membership. We are the party that’s gained most council seats in by-elections since May at 11 across the whole of the country. As I say, the change in the tectonic plates of British politics in the last week or two …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) But it appears …

TIM FARRON:
… mean that we matter more than we ever have.

ANDREW MARR:
I’m sorry, but it appears that you no longer have Jenny Tonge.

TIM FARRON:
I spoke to Jenny Tonge last night. She’s not a member of the Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords, so she sits as an independent. So in so far as I own anybody, she’s not ours to start off with.

ANDREW MARR:
I see. But she regards Jeremy Corbyn as more honest than your party.
TIM FARRON:
I’m only half hearing you. So you’re saying that … Can you tell me that again …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) She regards Jeremy Corbyn as more honest than you lot.

TIM FARRON:
Well she takes a view on Israel Palestine which she’s entitled to take. I believe in a two state solution. I also believe that you don’t get there by backing extremists who support violence. And so it’s very important, if we’re going to ever solve that incredibly important problem in the Middle East, you don’t do it by making out one side is the lone transgressor and you’ve got to make sure we have a solution which is going to work and mean that two state solution must come to pass. Netanyahu mustn’t be allowed to stop that. Neither should others who support the other side.

ANDREW MARR:
Alright. Now the columnist in the Independent on Sunday, John Rentoul, makes an interesting point this morning. He says for you to win over Labour MPs, you have to decide what kind of party you are. They, the moderates, are social democrats; you are a self-confessed liberal. When it comes to things like civil disobedience and human rights and so forth, a lot of the people who agree with you are actually on the Corbyn side of the party. So what can you do to win over Labour MPs who you might need to kind of boost your chances in the next year or so? What’s your offer to them?

TIM FARRON:
Well, first of all … Well I mean, first of all, we’re not defining ourselves in terms of anybody else. We are liberals. We are people who believe in social justice, we believe in being economically credible because you can’t defend the National Health Service, have decent schools and have decent police services if your economy isn’t growing properly, so that is a very clear position that we have that it appears that Jeremy Corbyn and co have chosen to vacate. But to my mind what you have in front of you in the last 5 months since the Conservatives went it alone in government and the Liberal Democrats left government, or indeed were ejected from government, we’ve
had our housing association properties being sold off, we’ve seen human rights being got rid of to the Human Right Acts, we see your internet freedom being got rid of, we see tax credits being taken away …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) Sure.

TIM FARRON:
… so people who work really hard on low incomes get their incomes cut. You see all the subsidies and support for our green industry across Britain creating…which has hundreds of thousands of people working in it, being got rid of. Now that is in sad negativity …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) I suppose …

TIM FARRON:
…but a proof of what the Liberal Democrats are for and have done. And so you now see, since May 7th, all the reasons why the Liberal Democrats mattered so much, and it’s the fear of the loss of those values in British politics that drove 20,000 people to join us and millions of more I hope to support us in the future.

ANDREW MARR:
So do you change anything, do you compromise on anything in order to lure over Labour MPs?

TIM FARRON:
No what we say …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) No you don’t.

TIM FARRON:
… is that in Britain you have a Conservative government that is lurching to extremes,
that is hitting very hardworking people on low incomes, that is getting rid of British traditional liberties, that is toying with leaving the EU – which would destroy hundreds of thousands, if not millions of jobs in Britain and make Britain less relevant on the international stage …

ANDREW MARR:  
Right, okay.

TIM FARRON:  
… and that government needs cre… Andrew, this is important … that government needs credibly opposing. And if the official opposition …

ANDREW MARR:  
(over) You have 8 MPs, it’s going to be very hard.

TIM FARRON:  
... chooses to lurch into fantasy economics then our job is to make sure that we provide that commitment to social justice and economic credibility.

ANDREW MARR:  
You can’t possibly be the opposition with 8 MPs, way behind the SNP, way behind the Labour Party, can you?

TIM FARRON:  
I’m bound to observe that you know 5 months ago you wouldn’t have expected us to be here with our membership increased by a third or with us gaining more council seats than anybody else or indeed with us in a position where people are talking about us with more seriousness than they’ve done for many, many years.

ANDREW MARR:  
(over) Up to a point …

TIM FARRON:  
(over) You mentioned the SNP. You know 6 months ago, the SNP had just 6 MPs and
today Scotland is sadly something akin to a one party state. So don’t assume that our position now is a position we must remain. There is a vast space in British politics for a party that is socially just and economically credible and we are determined to fill that space. The Tories must not be allowed …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) Alright. Do …

TIM FARRON:
… to get away with doing the things they’re doing …

ANDREW MARR:
Okay.

TIM FARRON:
… without being credibly opposed.

ANDREW MARR:
Do you agree with Vince Cable there should be a new party on the centre left? Yes or no?

TIM FARRON:
Well I mean we’ve got the Liberal Democrats. Why would we create a new party?

ANDREW MARR:
So that’s a no. Alright.

TIM FARRON:
My sense is that there are liberals in other parties who are not yet Liberal Democrats. People in the Labour Party. Actually there are many people in the Conservatives who think that David Cameron and George Osborne attacking low income workers is a terrible thing to do …

ANDREW MARR:
Okay.

TIM FARRON:
… and think that risking Britain's relevance and prosperity by pulling us out of the European Union or taking that risk is a terrible thing to do. And I want to reach out to those people too. It …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) Okay. One final … I’m sorry. One final question. A small story on the front pages this morning is that you want to ban ice cream vans because they’re diesel engines. Is that true?

TIM FARRON:
I read that. No. I mean, so I think that …

ANDREW MARR:
Ice creams are safe in a Liberal Democrat Britain, are they?

TIM FARRON:
The way we make party policy is through conference, it’s very democratic. The aim of that motion is well intentioned – it’s about making sure that we reduce carbon emissions – but targeting idling ice cream vans is absolutely not on my agenda and we shouldn’t be doing it.

ANDREW MARR:
Mr Whippy survives. Thank you very much indeed, Tim Farron, indeed.

TIM FARRON:
Mr Whippy is safe in my hands, yes.

ANDREW MARR:
Good stuff.

INTERVIEW ENDS