ANDREW MARR SHOW, 29TH APRIL, 2018

SIR VINCE CABLE, MP
Leader, Liberal Democrats

AM: Sir Vince, can I start by asking whether you think Amber Rudd should now resign?

VC: I think we should wait and see what she has to say tomorrow. I mean clearly she is in considerable difficulty on two scores. I mean either she’s misled parliament or she was the last person in the country to know that the Home Office was operating a quota system for deportees and they’re both difficult issues for her, but I don’t believe in lynch mobs, I want to hear what she has to say.

AM: You’re being very measured, of course. Is that because the Liberal Democrats are also partly responsible for this hostile environment on immigration that’s caused the trouble in the first place, ‘cause it happened under the coalition when you guys were there sitting alongside them.

VC: Well actually we spent a lot of our time in the coalition fighting Theresa May personally in my case and my colleagues. Norman Baker resigned over it, I you know, tried to roll back a lot of the things. But actually I think all parties have got some responsibility to this. It goes back to New Labour. I think the working assumption successive governments have made is that the public out there are pretty bigoted and they’ve got to be given red meat in the form of these very restrictive measures. It’s done a lot of harm. I think the interesting thing about Windrush is that perhaps for the first time, you know, the public opinion has been ahead of the politicians, seeing that there’s a terrible injustice here and it should not be allowed to pass.
AM: And you say the Lib Dems were pushing back against this policy all the way through, but who was the Minister in charge of the crucial Cabinet Committee at the time can you remind us?

VC: Well it may well have been the Deputy Prime Minister. I suspect.

AM: Nick Clegg, it surely was.

VC: He fought a very good fight actually on this.

AM: But he then made a very, very powerful speech about the importance of deporting illegal immigrants and sort of boasting about how their bank accounts were being frozen and taken away and they weren't being allowed to drive and so on. He sounded very gung ho for the policy at the time.

VC: Well I don't think that was the spirit that I heard. I mean there were a whole lot of very powerful measures that Theresa May was pushing at the time. Things like making landlords responsible for immigration control. We stopped that. We simply had pilot studies, because once the Lib Dems were out of the coalition they just introduced the policy in a very aggressive way. But what I think all this is forgetting about is actually we're people. I mean on my surgery on Friday night a lady came along, her husband is being deported tomorrow to Sri Lanka. He alleges he's been tortured, may well have been, and I think that the central point is that we're not talking about numbers here, we're talking about real people and I hope that one of the lessons of the last few weeks of this is getting through.

AM: And I raise the question about a Liberal Democrat immigration policy. For quite a long time your party had a policy of an amnesty for illegal immigrants. Why did that go?

VC: I think because an unqualified amnesty is not the right approach, but I think if people have been living here a very long time and they've settled and they've got family here, we should
just exercise good judgement. But I think across the board amnesty, regardless of conditions, regardless of whether people with a criminal record was not the right approach, but I think where people have been settled – of course there’s the whole story about Windrush – they’ve been settled here for a generation, they’re law abiding citizens, they’ve paid their taxes, it’s absolutely outrageous that their status should be questioned.

AM: So now that I think almost everybody is looking again at immigration policy in the light of this, where would the Liberal Democrats like to be?

VC: I do believe you have to have managed borders. You have to have immigration control. But it should be done in a compassionate and efficient way. I mean I think one of the problems at the moment is that because the Home Office is hopeless understaffed, or perhaps not properly managed, but hopelessly understaffed, very large numbers of just terribly inefficient decisions are being made. I mean also on Friday night I had a couple came to see me, doing high tech work. Their visa clearance should have taken six months maximum, it’s taken 18 months, they’re now going to lose their jobs, they’ll lose their home. This happening to tens of thousands of people. It is very, very incompetent and it needs to be made much more efficient.

AM: I mentioned at the top of the programme that you made quite a striking intervention in your speech to the Liberal Democrat conference in March. I’d just like to remind people of what you said. You were talking about the Brexit vote. You said: “I thought the public have voted to be poorer. That is their right. What’s changed my mind is the evidence that Brexit was overwhelmingly the choice of the older generation. Too many were driven by a nostalgia for a world where passports were blue, faces were white and the map was coloured imperial pink.” That sounds as if you’re accusing Brexit voters of being racists.
VC: Some probably have that attitude -
AM: So you think the Brexit vote was tinged by racism?
VC: - but not all. No, no. The simple point I was making was that Brexit was very heavily influenced by age. Younger people overwhelmingly voted to Remain; older people overwhelmingly voted to Leave. And there were different motives, and you know some good reasons, some bad reasons. But I mean after all that we’ve experienced in the last few weeks around the immigration debate I mean the ugly truth is that race has been a key factor in British politics. I was simply making this quite explicit. Of course large numbers of older people who voted Brexit for what they thought were very good reasons. Nothing to do with that.

AM: Some voted because they were racist.
VC: Some undoubtedly were concerned with looking back to a world where immigration was not an issue in the way it is today.

AM: And the way you phrased that implies that you think because of that the Brexit referendum result wasn’t in some sense legitimate.

VC: Well it was legitimate. It happened. I mean I’m not try to reopen the referendum, it’s happened, we’re living with the consequences of it. But the view I and my party take is we have no idea at the moment what Brexit’s going to look like. All kind of things could happen and at the end of it, when we have a clearer picture later this year about what Brexit involves, we go back to the public and have a public vote on the outcome.

AM: To be absolutely clear you’re not suggesting that lots of Brexit voters didn’t vote for Brexit for completely honourable constitutional reasonable reasons?

VC: Absolutely, absolutely.
AM: Okay and you want this second vote very much. Can I ask you about-?
VC: It isn’t a second vote because it’s not rerunning the last one.
AM: It’s a great semantic debate.
VC: It’s an important semantic point.

AM: All right, okay well another vote. A vote of the public, whatever we call it. There’s a lot of stuff in the papers today suggesting that there is a majority in the Commons as well as the Lords to tie the government’s hands, as it were, when they finally bring their deal back to the House of Commons. Is that your understanding?

VC: Well I think there is a Commons vote coming up very shortly on the customs union, which is I think quite an important staging point. Large numbers of Conservatives as well as opposition parties realise I think leaving the customs union would be particularly disastrous and they may well vote to change that. There is stuff coming through the House of Lords which is questioning some of the very damaging centralising features of the current legislation. So it’s absolutely right that parliament should be questioning and changing the approach to Brexit.

AM: We’ve got a lot of English local election seats coming up this week. You said this is going to be ‘a watershed moment for the Lib Dems.’ You got hammered last time round. What would a watershed feel like?

VC: Well I’m quietly optimistic that we are turning the corner and that we’ve done well in real elections over the last six months or so, much better than the other two parties.

AM: Hundreds of new councillors?
VC: No, the way I would – what I would regard as a good night is that we hold the various councils we have and we quite a lot of
Lib Dem councils, very good quality, we want to see them returned. I think on a good night we’ll win one or two more.

AM: Take back Richmond, take back Kingston on Thames?
VC: They’re certainly in play. I’m not making a prediction of them and I think there are large numbers of other areas. I mean a place like Sunderland, Hull for example where we’re facing the Labour Party where we don’t expect to win the councils, we may, but where we hopefully will get a bridgehead in the form of a few councillors that we can then build on in future. That’s what I’d regard as a good outcome.

AM: Sir Vince Cable, thanks very much indeed.