AM: Now this election was supposed to be the Lib Dem’s great opportunity to rise from the dead and speak for the millions who voted to Remain inside in the EU. Instead, and rather bizarrely, Tim Farron’s opening days were sidetracked by a row over whether or not, as a committed Christian, he believed gay sex was a sin. So, can he recover? Well Tim Farron joins me now.

TF: Morning, Andrew.

AM: Before we turn to that issue – good morning, Tim – there’s a slight air of unreality hanging over your campaign at the moment, because you have said; ‘I want to be leader of the Opposition,’ and you have said; ‘this is the chance for the British people to change the course of the country,’ with regard to Brexit. Given the number of MPs you’ve got and your realistic opportunities that’s going it a bit, isn’t it?

TF: Well look, nobody can affect the result of the last General Election. We can hopefully affect the result of the one that’s coming and let’s not pretend the Prime Minister’s chosen this election for any other reason than a cold, calculated desire to do what is right for the Conservative Party, not for the country. So she expects some kind of coronation. What’s blindingly obvious is that Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour Party are obsessed with fighting amongst themselves. There is a vacancy for the Leader of the Opposition and I say given this a historic moment for Britain, whether we choose to go over the cliff edge of a hard Brexit or whether we choose to let the people decide on the terms of the deal, the Liberal Democrats put ourselves in a position where we will say we will be the opposition, the strong opposition that Britain desperately needs.
ANDREW MARR SHOW, TIM FARRON, LIB DEMS

AM: I want to come onto the reality of how many seats you might get and so forth later on, but you have had a very, very difficult first week over the whole gay sex issue and it wasn’t – the big problem with this that the very voters you most need to win over, young, liberal minded, Europhile voters, are the ones most worried about your position.

TF: Well I wouldn’t have spent – I wouldn’t have chosen to spend you know some of the first week talking about my personal faith, but you can’t affect what people choose to ask you. What I do choose to do is say to the British people, this is the biggest choice we face in a generation. We have this enormous issue about whether we leave the single market, whether we go for a hard Brexit, whether we are forced to accept a deal that will affect all of us for generations, and yet we have a Labour Party that has held Theresa May’s hand as they jumped off the cliff edge to a hard Brexit. And this is an important moment, so for young people, people who’d like to remain, but also those people who voted leave and think nevertheless the Prime Minister is taking us in a wrong direction, the Liberal Democrats are offering you the chance to change the future of this country.

AM: Do you accept that the gay sex row deflected your message in a crucial part of the campaign and they’re the same voters who are also very, very worried about the tuition fees? They remember the tuition fees promise and they’re still angry about that.

TF: Well then they’ll remember that I was one of the largest number of Liberal Democrats who voted against the tuition fee rise –
AM: You went the other way.
TF: Right.
AM: So the question is are you going to change the policy?
TF: But I also take the view that we are looking at something that is going to cast Britain’s future for 20, 30, 40 years. So you’re right
in many ways to focus on young voters. They’ll be the ones living with the consequences of the deal that we don’t know the outcome of yet. I mean this week we’ve seen –

AM: So on tuition fees are you going to change the policy?

TF: Well we want it to be a fairer system. We believe that fees and indeed what one pays back afterwards should reflect your ability to pay. We got a better deal than the Tories they were going to give us on our own, but the real issue here is how do you produce and provide for young people, for all people, a future that is brighter than the one we’re currently going to get? At the moment the Prime Minister has chosen to have a General Election on her terms because she assumes an enormous majority. And around the country there are very few people I think, including myself, who expect anything other than Theresa May to be in 10 Downing Street on the 9th of June. And the question is will she be properly opposed? It cannot be by Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour Party.

AM: Let me come onto this because you have said also that you wouldn’t do a coalition deal either with Theresa May or with Jeremy Corbyn. Now if you want to affect the way the government behaves after this election when it comes to Brexit you want maximum leverage and you seem to be saying, ‘yeah, but I’m going to throw away any possible lever I might have however well I do’.

TF: I think the most important thing for a leader is clarity. Clarity number one is to be honest with you and everybody else. We all know it’s the truth. The Prime Minister is heading for a colossal coronation on the 8th of June. Clarity point number two, so let’s not pretend there’s going to be any hung parliament anyway –

AM: A ‘colossal coronation?’
TF: That’s how it looks to me and she expects the British people to turn up in their Sunday best and to wave the flag. That is not how a democracy works. And we’re determined to turn the coronation she expects into a contest that Britain desperately needs. The second reason we’ve been very clear that we’ll not be having a coalition with Labour or the Tories is because I want people to look at the Liberal Democrats and realise when they vote for us they’re not voting for us as a proxy for anything else, they’re voting for the Liberal Democrat’s plan to invest in health and social care – to invest in education and to make sure that Britain does not head off the cliff edge of a hard Brexit. The British people have the final say not the politicians.

AM: You sound to me that at the beginning of this campaign you have in effect given up. It’s all Theresa May’s, we might as well walk away and pick up our business afterwards.

TRF: We’ll we’re the only one not walking away. So Jeremy Corbyn appears to be fighting the next Labour leadership election. The Labour Party are fighting amongst themselves and have given up on the job of opposing the government. Britain desperately needs a strong, decent opposition for the sake of democracy. You don’t need to agree with me on everything to agree with me that Britain needs a strong opposition and the Liberal Democrats are determined to provide it.

AM: Now if you want to be leader of the opposition then you need to go from 8 seats to what, 130 seats? I mean it will be the biggest change in the Liberal Democrat’s fortunes in living memory. Not living memory, in memory of any kind. Historians will be struggling to find any parallel and there a lot of people listening to what you say about the coronation and looking at the polls and saying, this is a complete fantasy. Tim Farron might want to
believe it briefly as he's shaving first thing in the morning but nobody else will.

TF: Well I mean I think I'm probably one of the most self-aware politicians. I'm aware of all the things that you say. I'm also aware that a week ago the two main parties in France came third and fifth. These are times when politics in the western hemisphere at least has never been more unpredictable. This is also an election that Theresa May has chosen not to get a mandate, she doesn't need a mandate, and how can you have a mandate on something that's not been written yet, anyway, the deal? But it is an election nonetheless that could absolutely change the course of British political history. If you cannot be ambitious at this point to allow those millions of people who are appalled by the direction the Prime Minister is taking us in, not just out of Europe but out the single market without the British people having the final say, if you want to prevent the calamity of that hard Brexit you have one option. It is the Liberal Democrats and you need to take it.

AM: And to get to those seats you needs lots and lots of metropolitan and university towns, all those seats which voted Remain last time, but you also need to clean up a lot of seats in the South west. But the South West is exactly the part of the country that voted for Brexit. I can remember an old Liberal tradition when the old Liberals in the south west were very Eurosceptic, they were right of centre and that tradition has more or less died in your party.

TF: Well I don't want to go on a little bit of a rabbit hole here, but you will remember that I resigned from the Liberal Democrat frontbench about ten years ago because I am a bit of a Eurosceptic. I'm somebody who challenges people in power. The EU, in government, in councils, but I'm somebody who believes that Britain is better off in the European Union and what the South West is famous for is wanting to be able to be self-governing, to
be independent, to be different from those in Westminster who tell them what to do. And the worst thing for the West Country is to be a blanket of blue where the Tories just take you for granted. And that’s the thing I think people around the country are beginning to realise. That a Conservative majority is now not in question, but a Conservative landslide means they will take you for granted wherever you live.

AM: So you’re looking for an extraordinary change in the politics of this country? We read today that you’ve been talking to Tony Blair about this. Can you tell us anything about the conversation and whether there is some prospect from your point of view of a major realignment after this election?

TF: Well several months ago I met with Tony Blair at his request. I thought it was only courteous to do so. I have many very, very clearly on the record disagreements with Tony Blair, not least over the illegal and counterproductive war in Iraq. But I do admire Tony Blair for one thing in particular and that is his ability to put together a ‘small c coalition’ that was able to win a General Election and defeat the Conservatives in 1997. I admire progressives and he is, broadly, I guess, a progressive. I admire progressives who are able to win elections because if you cannot win then you cannot change people’s lives. The NHS is in danger as long as progressives cannot win and that’s why it’s important that we do.

AM: Can I come back to my original question? Which is do you see therefore beyond this election some major realignment in British politics?

TF: I’m focusing on this election and let’s remember where the progressive forces are at the moment if you want to call them that. Everybody knows that the SNP can only gain one seat off the Tories and that’s all they’ve got mathematically available to them
unless there is an aggressive foreign policy coming from Nicola Sturgeon soon. I wouldn’t write it out but that’s where things are. One gain possible. Everybody accepts, everybody accepts Labour are going backwards not forwards, so the only flank through which Theresa May is remotely vulnerable and where progressives have any chance of defeating Conservative is the Liberal Democrats. Yes, in the West Country, in my part of the world in the North West, here in London. If you want a strong opposition the Liberal Democrats are now your only choice.

AM: Pity you couldn’t find a set for Rachel Johnson.

TF: Well Rachel’s a fantastic addition to the team. We’ve picked the right sibling, or rather she picked us, and it’s an absolute blessing to us to have somebody –

AM: Would you like to see her stand as London Mayor in the Liberal Democrat cause in due course?

TF: I’m sure she’ll be marvellous at it but shall I say that’s an election for what, three years down the road and we’ll worry about that after the one we’re currently fighting.

AM: Plenty of time to talk in due course, Tim Farron thank you very much indeed for talking to us.