

ANDREW MARR SHOW, 24<sup>th</sup> APRIL, 2016

TIM FARRON, LIBERAL DEMOCRAT LEADER

AM: A great thing to be a party leader, but this party leader in these circumstances, not so much – I don't know whether it's a hospital pass or a poison chalice or a a poisoned chalice thrown at you as a hospital pass but it's been pretty rough for you, hasn't it?

TF: It's a tremendous challenge, there's the euphemism you can have for the morning. But it's a joyful one. I mean the result we had last May was of course devastating, but I can't change that. What I can affect is how we go forward and what's happened since last May has been this remarkable upsurge in our membership, 50% increase in the membership, and you know, people like you and I who keep an eye on these things know that every Thursday there's a clutch of council by elections, a hundred or so of them since last May, and staggeringly, against everybody's expectations, the party that's gained more seats and more votes than anybody else have been the Liberal Democrats. So there is a real reason of us coming back. But I'm absolutely clear this was not a 12 month job. We've got a big job ahead of us, but I think the state of British politics requires the Liberal Democrats to recover so we better had.

AM: Now your former party leader did what he thought was absolutely the right thing for the country, going into coalition with the Conservatives and doing his best and tried to liberalise policies and so forth. As a result, they stabbed your party in the back, jumped all over you with their tacky boots and nearly finished you off. Will you ever go into any kind of relationship with a Conservative Party again?

TF: Well, I didn't join the Liberal Democrats as a smart career move, but I didn't join either to cop out and to avoid power. If you

want to change the world you've got to be prepared to get involved with power and you know, you look back over the last 12 months you see –

AM: You wouldn't go back for more with these people, would you?

TF: Well, I want us to be in power. I mean I think you learn from the lessons of what's gone by, but I actually think that all of us collectively as a country have learnt over the last 12 months. You see the attack on our schools through forced acadamisation. The attack on junior doctors. You look at the dismantling of the green energy programme the Liberal Democrats brought in, and it's a reminder to everybody what the Liberal Democrats were doing. Doing great things and stopping dreadful things.

AM: Some people look at your Party Conference last time and you see your opposition to fracking, and your enthusiasm for decriminalising cannabis and they say, isn't the Liberal Democrats going back to the sort of open toed sandals of the 1970s? These issues are important to a lot of people but they may seem marginal to the great issues facing the country.

TF: Well I mean they're all evidence based policies but our fundamental approach is about how we rebuild from the grassroots up and we have the local elections and indeed the elections in Scotland and Wales and here in London on May 5<sup>th</sup> and our job is to build back up from the grassroots to give people the opportunity to vote for somebody who is – have got a credible plan for their area, but it also means tackling the big issues. I mean we've got to confess, I think, haven't we, all of us, that one of the reasons why a pretty dreadful Conservative government is getting away with things at the moment is because they have the –

AN: Your words, not mine.

TF: Well I would say so. But the most shambolic and ineffective official opposition in living memory under Jeremy Corbyn. I've got nothing against the man, he's a nice fella. It's not that he's an extremist it's just that Labour are the worst opposition in history, so we have got to recover, we've got to provide people with a real alternative and that's what we're going to do.

AM: Give me an example of a policy where you think you can defeat the government and I'm going to give you a hint. It's to do with child refugees.

TF: Well I was going to say tomorrow.

AM: There's a vote tomorrow.

TF: You didn't need to give me a hint, Andrew. It's where all my focus is at the moment. I absolutely am trying to defeat the government tomorrow on the proposal, the Alf Dubbs' Amendment we've been campaigning for for six months.

AM: So to be clear, this is about Britain taking more child refugees who are already inside the EU.

TF: It's specifically unaccompanied minors within Europe. Refugees. We reckon there's about 30 thousand, Save the Children reckon about 30 thousand in Europe. Absolutely devastatingly, we also reckon that 10 thousand of those 30 thousand have gone missing and they will be in the hands of traffickers, some of them sexually exploited. So what Save the Children are proposing, what the Liberal Democrats have been behind for the last six to nine months, is a proposal that Britain just takes our fair share, 3 thousand of those unaccompanied children from the camps in Europe. And given – you know, my challenge to Theresa May, who'll be speaking to in this very spot in just a few minutes time, is you know, you on Monday, Theresa tomorrow and David Cameron, have the opportunity to help those children and prevent that trafficking to take place by taking 3 thousand.

AM: And you've got some Conservative MPs on your side. Others will say, this is going to just draw more children, encourage people in Syria and elsewhere to send their children into the EU in the sure knowledge that they will eventually get a safe refuge in Britain.

TF: So I don't think that's the case at all. I mean what we know is that there are something like four or five million refugees fleeing from the region and a fraction – maybe a quarter of them – are in Europe. So the idea that Europe is the only place these people are heading is not true. But Europe is one of the places people have gone to and I've been to the camps, I've seen families absolutely devastated, people who've fled war and persecution, the threat of death for them and their children and they took an enormous risky decision to cross the water, come to Europe. Why? Because what they left behind was riskier still and my question to Theresa May –

AM: And this is tomorrow's vote.

TF: It is.

AM: Can you win it do you think?

TF: Yes of course we can. And my question to every Conservative MP, to Theresa May and to David Cameron is if you were in the situation of these Syrian refugees, if your children were like these unaccompanied children in Europe now, what would you want other countries to do for you? The answer is obvious.

AM: All right, final question, you've got these local elections coming up but eventually there will be another General Election, what does recovery look like to the Liberal Democrats? Double figures of MPs?

TF: Good question. It's all nil nil at the moment. Every election starts as a level playing field and I would love us to be starting 50 seats higher than we currently are. We're not. And so our way back to a serious central part in British politics is to win these elections coming up, in local government across England and it's about advance.

AM: The most elected councillors this time round is your measure of success?

TF: I want us to make sure we make progress on the ground and to earn people's votes, because the reality is most people expect politicians to let them down. And what I want to challenge the Liberal Democrats across the country to do is to prove to the electorate that there is a difference about the Liberal Democrats. We can bring a freshness and a decency to serve people in their communities. To do what Liberals always did but do it ever than ever before. Roll our sleeves up and do community politics.

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