

Lib Dem stance could all end in tears for party

THE Liberal Democrats had what they must consider to be a good start to their annual conference as another Remain-supporting Tory MP has jumped ship to boost the growing Liberal Democrat Parliamentary Party.

However, for some of us this is less a cause for celebration and more time to pause for thought. Whilst it's true no political party is likely to turn down the chance to poach another's MPs we should all stop and consider what it says about the modern Liberals that previously dyed-in-the-wool neo-Conservatives feel comfortable finding a new berth there.

In 2017, it seemed that the Liberal Democrats had learned from the mistakes of Nick Clegg. Everyone had seen that the effects of a coalition with the Tories had put them in a poor electoral position. From the dizzying heights of 62 seats they fell all the way to eight.

Over the five years of coalition government it seemed that rather than Cameron saying 'I agree with Nick', Clegg had been following the bidding of Cameron. The party of Lloyd George and Charles Kennedy accepted a few cabinet seats, a doomed and badly presented referendum on proportional representation and a 5p tax on plastic bags for supporting the most crushing austerity the UK had seen since the 1930s, the growth of school academies, the cruel and discriminatory bedroom tax and the raising of university tuition fees.

It appeared that their liberal heritage had been sold for the proverbial mess of pottage.

But 2017 promised a new era. Tim Farron, while having for some, very questionable personal views on homosexuality, had not been in the coalition cabinet. He may have

endorsed the austerity policy but crucially he did not vote to triple tuition fees and came out of the coalition with his reputation relatively unscathed.

Possibly, just possibly, the Liberal Democrats were on their way to becoming a socially liberal party again. Now it appears this was a false dawn.

There have now been two leaders of the party since 2017. Vince Cable took the helm after Farron but found it hard to escape the damage to his standing of having previously taken the role of Secretary of State for Business in 2010. This year Cable stepped down to usher in another new era and Jo Swinson, previously, the undersecretary to Vince Cable in his ministerial post, took over.

This new era of liberalism, however, is beginning to look more and more like a return to 2010 and Swinson appears to be devising policy and making pronouncements that exhibit the same 'moral flexibility' that characterised the Clegg era and would frankly make an Olympic gymnast proud.

The party that has characterised itself as socially progressive for decades has just accepted some of the most infamously homophobic MPs in the House of Commons into its ranks. Their new recruits didn't just vote against gay rights legislation, some deliberately took part in actions designed to hurt the LGBT+ community.

Ex-Justice Minister Sam Gyimah

Andrew Hedges



entered the public eye for filibustering the SNP's Turing Bill. Philip Lee didn't just vote for an amendment to prevent HIV-positive immigrants from entering the UK, he wrote it.

But perhaps this is best understood by realising that Swinson has fundamentally shifted the nature of her party from a national, progressive organisation to a one-issue party. Lee didn't just advocate homophobic policies, he also advocated the removal of NHS money from treating those with type 2 diabetes. He voted to reduce central government funds to local government, voted against an elected House of Lords, against removing hereditary peers and against laws to promote equality and human rights.

The promotion of policies like these were supposed to have defined the Liberal Democrats since their conception and Swinson has sold them out. This is all, it appears, to reshape the party, to define it by its position on Brexit.

A single issue party, like UKIP, rarely fares well in the long term. It may work in Swinson's favour at the next election but it may very well destroy the party from the inside.

They are no longer a socially liberal party and it now becomes very hard to distinguish them from Cameron's Tory Party.

While Boris Johnson makes a Trump-like turn to populism and Jeremy Corbyn embraces Keynesian economics, the Liberal Democrats now appear to be the last party to uncritically accept the beliefs of neo-liberalism, that the only really important consideration in organising society is how to maximise profits for business and doing so involves running the country as if you were the CEO of a multinational corporation.

Any real commitment to the socially progressive values that once characterised the Liberal Democrats has been thrown out with the Brexit bathwater.

■ @HedgesAh

Cycling is a force for good – if we're able to stay safe

Paul Benneworth



MY recent job move from the Netherlands to Norway had radical consequences for my cycling. Those idyllic pictures on social media of Dutch parents on children-laden bikes were a daily reality there.

Geography explains bikes' popularity in the Netherlands – its sheer flatness means that cycling is rarely any more tiring than walking.

In that sense, the contrast with Norway couldn't be greater. I work in Bergen, a city of seven mountains with almost no flat land. Any bike journey is a series of long uphill slogs punctuated by brief moments of downhill relief.

But despite this natural disadvantage, there's a definite sense cycling in Norway is becoming more popular. Tourists on city-bikes struggling up the Nygårdspark's steep slopes may cut a comical figure, but it shows the popularity both of Bergen's city-bike scheme and cycling more generally.

Underpinning this popularity in both countries is a culture of tolerance for cyclists. With so many people relying on bikes, everyone has a stake in safe driving behaviours.

Cyclists can sometimes seem a slow-moving nuisance to impatient drivers, but there's a kind of social pact: I'll drive safely around your mother cycling to play tennis if you take care around my son cycling to school.

It's almost a deal with myself – if I keep my foot off the gas for a minute, then I've got a higher chance of seeing my son Theo safely at home after school.

So I was shocked at how aggressive some drivers are in the North East, particularly with our neglected roads. This summer cycling down Monkseaton Drive, I briefly swerved to avoid a particularly sharp-sided pothole.

I was overtaken by a car who pulled alongside me and ominously lowered their window. A torrent of foul-mouth abuse followed from a driver aggrieved that me avoiding an accident had caused them a momen-

tary inconvenience.

In more than a decade's cycling in the North East I've been lucky to only have had three road rage incidents. And although they are always shocking moments, they don't make me feel immediately unsafe.

But they do make cycling feel less safe, all the more important now my son wants to cycle to school here in the North East. Next time it the aggressive driver might not encounter me – with the nerve to dodge the pothole – but a timid schoolkid who hits the hole and breaks their arm or worse.

The Netherlands and Norway did not suddenly wake up as patient, well-equipped cycling countries. In Netherlands, they built cycling lanes after WWII as a cheap emergency solution, planning to rebuild them as parking lanes once everyone could afford cars.

But the Dutch found they liked their "steel horses", and they left their cycling lanes in place. Over time, the Netherlands gradually became a country where everyone cycles.

Global warming highlights the urgency of adopting low-car-

bon forms of transport, making cycling is perfect for replacing the majority of short domestic trips. But how can we arrange this necessary "safety pact", where drivers kill their speed rather than cyclists?

The region did show amazing patience for last week's Tour of Britain bike-race passing through the north of Tyne coast en route to a picturesque Newcastle city centre finish. Maybe it's the next step in building more patience for local bike users, if we only heed its message.

I was thrilled to see TV helicopter shots of my son alongside schoolmates enthusiastically cheering the passing race. But I'd be more thrilled if the Tour's legacy was finally guaranteeing him cycling safely to school every day.

■ North Shields-born Paul Benneworth is a Professor in the Western Norway University of Applied Sciences.



► Liberal Democrat MPs at the conference including former Conservative recruits Phillip Lee (right) and Sam Gyimah (fourth from right)