

WAGES OF SIN

Liz Barker tried to convince Tim Farron that his lack of clarity on gay rights would be damaging - she didn't realise how damaging

My only meeting with Tim Farron took place in 2015. Following the Channel 4 News car crash in which he repeatedly refused to say whether he thinks gay sex is a sin and falsely presented his voting record on the Equality Act and same sex marriage, I wrote to Tim setting out in detail why his stance was damaging to the party and to him.

I was pleased to be invited by his staff to talk because I rarely criticise other members publicly, and I think it is courteous to speak privately first if possible.

I explained that, while Cathy Newman's motivation for her question was probably malicious, his failure to answer was deeply hurtful to LGBT+ people, their families and allies, many of whom are Christian.

Tim told me repeatedly what Christians think, and when I pointed out that I come from a religious family and have spent a lifetime appeasing people's beliefs, he told me again.

He pointed out, quite correctly, that evangelical Christians regard all sex outside of heterosexual marriage as sinful. I argued that evangelical Christians would not deny heterosexual couples the right to marry, but they would discriminate against longstanding monogamous LGBT couples.

I also questioned whether evangelical Christians write to unmarried heterosexuals, whom they have never met, accusing them of immorality, depravity and criminality. I suspect they don't, but they do write to me. I explained that religion has often been used to justify great hurt and damage. Many LGBT people still suffer, and some of us cannot stand by when evangelicals try to pray the gay away from members of their congregation. Nor can we remain silent when 25% of young homeless people are LGBT and many of them were kicked onto the streets by religious families.

We talked about the fact - and it is a fact - that Tim has never acted in a homophobic manner. He has been supportive of LGBT+ party members and during his time as leader we adopted the most progressive policy of any UK party on trans rights. Commendable as those actions are, they did nothing to counteract the enduring public impression that fundamentally he does not believe in LGBT + equality.

Disquiet among members was reinforced by Tim's denial that he voted against the Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) regulations 2007, which prevent LGBT+ people being denied goods and services, and his claim that his vote for the Same Sex Marriage Bill to receive a second reading signified support when in fact he abstained on the subsequent substantive vote.

During our meeting I said that it was a matter of public record and that he had supported evangelical opposition to LGBT equality and that it would be better to explain why he couldn't support equality when other Christian parliamentarians could. He

declined to do so for two years, hence a question of faith became a matter of trust.

My final advice was that even if Liberal Democrats said nothing publicly, our enemies would not let this go and he needed to sort out a tenable position. Maybe the general election 'grid', if one existed, had planned that the first two weeks would see the party impaled on the subject of gay sex, while Tories and Labour said of course it wasn't a sin and got their key issues across. Repeatedly on the doorstep voters cited this as a reason not to vote Liberal Democrat and quietly party members, some of them active Christians, questioned whether our leader could hold such views.

The election campaign was abysmal. For the third time we had no credible message, no effective targeting. Everywhere I went people stared endlessly at screens giving the impression that, whatever data we might have had, there was little reliable intelligence. Seats were saved or won despite, not because of, the national campaign.

Post-election analysis of the poor Liberal Democrat performance included focus group research which showed Tim's anti-gay views were the one thing which was known about him, but it was only one reason why he was not seen as credible leader of the opposition.

I had a feeling that this might be used to distract attention from the many poor judgements throughout the campaign (and judging by Tim's resignation statement I was spot on). So, without discussion with any one (sorry to disappoint Lib Dem Voice conspiracy theorists) I tweeted a couple of articles. I did so because previous Liberal Democrat election analyses, which were nothing but whitewashes, have led to this dire campaign in which we got our lowest vote share since 1959. We cannot go on like this.

We need new leadership which can articulate effectively our values, economic sagacity and a message of hope to younger generations. The people whose handling of campaign messaging and resources has been incompetent must go.

The Tories will learn the lessons of defeat quickly and come right back in the local elections. We need to reacquire the intelligence and judgement which won us elections pre-Clegg and modernise them with digital skills tailored to each seat we fight.

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