

IT'S TIME FOR US TO FIX A BROKEN BRITAIN

After three wasted years and the possible horror of Brexit it's time for the Liberal Democrat to take the lead in creating a reformed Britain, says Roger Hayes

This may seem harsh Ed, but on reflection I am pleased that Jo Swinson won by a resounding margin. There's no 52/48 equivocation here and so, now our youngest ever, first women leader can have the best chance to build the Liberal society that I have spent my life working towards. It's time.

But what does that actually mean in these chaotic and uncertain times?

'Britain isn't working' – some will remember that Saatchi and Saatchi inspired poster campaign for the 1979 general election which brought us the tabloids' golden dawn of Thatcherism.

Then it was a snaking line of unemployed, but today nothing bloody works. The trains; the electricity; the flood defences; the benefits system; the prisons; the you name it. It doesn't work and there is no prospect of any of it working properly in the future. We have carelessly dribbled away control to the unaccountable private sector and to never-reliable 'market forces'.

Your contract to have the bins emptied is with the council, but their contract is with someone else and goodness knows who manages them – certainly no one we can get to talk to when inevitably it all goes wrong.

And all we have now is the tabloids' new and glorious golden dawn of the prospect of Brexit. But will a wild-west, chlorinated trade deal with the Washington cowboy keep the lights on; have the trains run on time (or at all); care for our sick and elderly; or keep the ever-rising flood levels at bay?

These are the most desperate of times but, although we never would have wished for it, now it's here, ironically, this could be our time to shine. But only if we are bold, clear-headed and tenacious.

Here are my three considered tasks for the Liberal Democrats to tackle. These will define us in a national campaign, see us through an autumn general election and set out our programme into a new and (hopefully) enlightened parliament.

I, of course, believe that we can and must defeat Brexit, but that isn't what this article is about. So as not to have made these past three and a half dreadful years a complete and utter waste of time let's claim these three tasks, and our opportunity to bring them about, as a faint silver lining.

Our detractors like to paint us as being all about Brexit and nothing else. This will help show them what lies beyond the nightmare of Brit and why it must be stopped:

A RENEWED BRITAIN

The first order of business is a renewed Britain – renewed in both body and soul. Beyond Brexit there will be a real need to do all the things that we always wanted to do to fix our country and its place in the world – tackle the climate crisis, build real affordable homes in sustainable locations, regenerate our economy through regional investment, invest in health and education and technology – as a party we have never been short of policy or ambition, but I do think that there is a real need to look afresh at what I kept banging on about during the Coalition – as much as what we do is important, so is how we go about doing it. And of course, most of that is not going to be new legislation or new things, but the fair and transparent delivery of the 1,001 things that we have to get on and do regardless. You know, the day-to-day governing of government.

Any cash-strapped Lib Dem-led local council will tell you that community politics starts with a people-centred approach. Listening to people, involving people, giving people control and agency over their own lives and impact in their communities.

Community politics is not about doing lots for people so that they will love us (vote for us), but about giving people the wherewithal to do things for themselves. Not the 'nanny state' or the 'controlling state', but a Liberal, enabling state. Our politicians and activists are the political wing of their communities, the bridge between government and the people. Let's see that is translated to become the overarching style of government in everything we do.

We need to nourish the soul of the nation and mend its broken heart. The populist madness has deliberately starved us of intellectual and cultural nurture as well as of the practical and economically sustaining necessities such as secure and meaningful work and an affordable home for our families. The gig economy could be very liberating for a new generation, but not when the options are pathetically reduced to which fast-food chain's zero-hours (non)contract to take.

Combining the right style of government with a massive investment in the future: modern technology, infrastructure and social development, will provide the jolt needed to renew our country. This is not just an opportunity to get Britain working again but to advance Britain, working closely with our partners in Europe and throughout the world, not in hopeless, impoverished ignorance, conformity and isolation.

A BETTER BRITAIN IN A BETTER EUROPE

Back before we went everywhere draped in the blue and gold of the EU, we were quite critical of the often over-engineered policies that emerged from Europe and, yes, its leviathan bureaucracy. So, as we most fervently wish to remain in Europe, let us be clear, with our Liberal colleagues across the bloc, that reform is both desired and necessary. But let us set our sights high.

In a modern, outward looking, interconnected world we can only make Britain better by being in the EU. And we can only make the EU better by being an active, enthusiastic and reforming member of the EU. However, there are three things that need to mark our ambitions for continued membership:

- * Better behaviour – less macho willy-wagging, posturing and generally spraying the furniture. Caroline Lucas may have been misguided in her all-female cabinet suggestion, but I certainly agree with the desire to reduce the testosterone
- * More open and enthusiastic collaboration – not so much what do we get out of it but what can we all achieve by working creatively together. There is still too much suspicion and fear and recent events have moved us backwards in this regard. The artists and scientists of Europe have quietly shown the way here, we should learn from them
- * Root and branch reform, not the odd treaty tweak here and there. Again, the how as well as the what needs to be given careful consideration. Guy Verhofstadt is the ideal leader for this important task

A REFORMED BRITAIN

Britain is tragically broken. Broken socially, economically and constitutionally. With the severe damage done by these past few years of distracting and uber-expensive madness the first two elements, our economy and society, may take some time to repair, but in the shorter-term our goal should be a comprehensive package of constitutional reforms making our country and, essentially its democracy, properly fit for the 21st century.

This litany will be as old as the hills for most Lib Dems but let's rehearse it one more time:

- * Proper electoral reform with STV for all elections.
- * Votes at 16 in all future elections.
- * Full voting rights for all EU citizens resident in the UK.

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*An elected second chamber – no more patronage and privilege, no more Lords and Ladies (sorry to my many chums in the Upper House).

*Parliamentary reform – a modern legislature with modern work practices and behaviours, no more Victorian dressing up and gobbledegook claptrap.

*Full review of UK federation, devolved powers to the nations, regions and to local councils.

*A written constitution – no more making it up as we go along.

*A full review of the role of monarchy and our head of state as part of our constitution.

*A modern Bill of Rights – everyone a citizen who knows where they stand.

*A participatory democracy through citizens' assemblies with meaningful consultation and policy development on a wide range of topics.

*Disestablishment of the church – a secular nation in a modern world.

The Liberal Democrats are a progressive party with ambitious

policies, it's time we equipped our country and its people to play its full role in a modern Europe and a 21st century world.

Bollocks to Brexit, this is the future. Let's make it ours – it's time.

Roger Hayes a former Liberal Democrat council leader and parliamentary candidate in Kingston-upon-Thames

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