

## Nick Clegg in conversation on Europe

### Demos

21 September, Deauville Lounge, Trouville Hotel, Bournemouth, 18:15

Speakers;

- Phil Collins, chief leader writer, The Times
- Rt Hon Nick Clegg MP

**Former Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg discussed the future of British politics, Europe and other issues during a very busy fringe event hosted by Demos. During the event he gave his verdict on working with the Labour Party, the new Conservative Government and potential campaigning approaches ahead of the EU Referendum.**

Phil Collins, chief leader writer of The Times and a trustee of Demos asked Nick Clegg to make sense of the current political landscape.

Former deputy prime minister Nick Clegg said it was difficult to know what the country was witnessing. The situation was very complex he argued, before describing the current rise in identity politics and the fall in left and right wing distinctions. It used to be easy to divide people, but not so now, he suggested.

There was a “visceral” politics of identity, divided on region, nation and an ‘us versus them’ attitude he said. This had come about through a feeling of insecurity around globalisation and a profound economic and social insecurity, he argued.

It would be foolish to suggest politics would ever return to normal, Clegg added.

Collins then asked about Clegg's assessment of the general election and how long it would take for people to view the SNP as a party of Government, rather than a party of insurgents.

Clegg said, especially in the South West, the party was on course for victory when postal votes were submitted, but lost the election in the weeks after the postal vote deadline.

People simply didn't want Ed Miliband and the SNP he said. “We could not compete with visceral fear” Clegg said of the prospect of an SNP/Labour coalition.

Collins suggested the Liberal Democrats would struggle to do a deal with a Labour Party led by Jeremy Corbyn.

Nick Clegg explained, looking at previous elections, that the key issue of the 2020 election would be impossible to predict until the election itself.

Following a question about defections and getting all the liberals in Parliament into one party Clegg noted the current electoral system pushed people together who did not particularly belong together, describing the current system as “remorseless and relentless”.

He said he had tried to unpick the artificial constraints of the current model, but had not made enough progress. The political system was “out of whack” with ideological divisions he suggested.

Collins then asked about the future of the party.

“The only way is up” Clegg said.

The party would continue to be ignored until it started winning again he suggested, and pointed to several pleasing results in local council by-elections as proof of progress.

Clegg questioned the motives behind the Northern Powerhouse and believed it would not be the vote winner, especially in the North, the Conservatives wanted.

The fragmented nature of British politics could work in the Liberal Democrats favour, Clegg added, and was confident the party could claw its way back.

Collins asked about the feeling of anti-politics sweeping the country.

Nick Clegg explained his belief that the new leader of the party, Tim Farron, had been very smart in not trying to expunge the coalition years from history and instead focus on the future with the upcoming European referendum.

Many people simply didn't care about Europe he feared and believed that was the significant difference from the Scottish independence referendum.

European integration had cemented peace on a continent that had previously been at war with itself he explained. This was an extraordinary achievement he added, noting the ambition of the project as a whole.

The “pool of sovereignty” allowed Britain to extend its influence and provided a “safety in numbers” situation.

The bulk of the debate will be about “jobs, jobs, jobs” Clegg said.

Phil Collins then asked whether the EU had served its purpose and was no longer needed.

The EU was a highly sophisticated response to reconcile the nation state Clegg believed but agreed that it was “imperfect”. There was a fundamental misunderstanding about the EU and what would happen if Britain pulled out of the single market he warned. Trading standards were just as important as tariffs he said, as it assured the same level of quality across Europe. This protection in law saved British manufacturers and customers huge sums of money.

When asked about the immigration question in relation to Europe, Clegg pointed out how just as many British people lived abroad, as European people did in the UK. He dismissed the notion of a European Union of services, trade and goods but not of people.

Collins turned to David Cameron's attempts at European renegotiation.

The current imbalances in the Eurozone needed an improved response of greater financial integration, Clegg suggested, and expressed his fear that current efforts towards renegotiation were taking up all of the Government's time and political capital.

The prime minister needed to shift gear to a more expansive argument advocating the benefits of EU membership, Clegg suggested.

The Conservative Party confused their obsession with Europe with everyone's obsession with Europe, Clegg believed. He called on party members to start the campaign to stay in Europe now and not wait for the Conservatives to start the campaign.

## Question and answer session

Delegates then asked Clegg about the possibility of another Scottish referendum and the Liberal Democrat approach to campaigning on Europe.

The SNP were “straining” for any trigger to hold another referendum and the EU referendum could be the reason, Clegg said.

It saddened him, he admitted, that the “wonderful union could be forfeited”.

Regarding Europe, Clegg said there was a fundamental “lopsided” flaw in Conservative thinking. He asked how the party could advocate leaving Europe to protect economic sovereignty, whilst at the same time award train contracts to French companies and water contracts of Belgian companies.

“Why is George Osborne in China” Clegg asked, before suggesting it was to give away nuclear sovereignty to China.

He described this as a “Janus faced approach”.

The next round of questions focussed on the difference between economic migrants, asylum seekers, the legacy of the “nasty party”, and how to target young people during the referendum and European free trade.

Freedom of travel was incredibly popular among young people Clegg said and could certainly be a popular line of debate to adopt during the campaign.

Discussing free trade, Clegg pointed out the flaw in many Conservative claims that Britain could operate like Norway.

“Norway has no say” Clegg said and explained how European law was faxed to Oslo without debate. Norway had lost sovereignty “on a scale that is unimaginable” he warned.

Clegg was critical of the Conservative Party for claiming to represent the centre ground having been asked about how to remind people about the legacy of the “nasty party”.

How could a centre ground party mishandle the refugee crisis, attack the BBC, introduce regressive tax credit measures and trash the green energy industry, Clegg asked.

“People will tire of the Tories talking to themselves on the EU” Clegg concluded.