**WESTERN DAILY PRESS**

**29th May 2014**

I vividly remember the time back in 1989 when the party was at a low ebb, to say the least. In fact, so low was it that in the opinion polls we had an asterisk against us; that’s right, our support wasn’t even registering as a positive number! Yet we kept going, and in the elections that year secured 35% of the vote in Somerset.

So if I fail to react to the present difficulties faced by the Liberal Democrats by running around like a headless-chicken, put that down to experience. Were the European election results poor? Undoubtedly so, made worse by low turn-out and a system which only allows you to vote for a party name rather than an effective candidate with a proven track record. And also, let’s face it, made worse by a policy position on Europe (one which, incidentally, I don’t fully share) which is not one with which the majority of the public identifies. So party members have every right to express concern.

But that doesn’t mean the party is in quite the terminal state that some would have you believe. Indeed, I’d go further than that and say that I fully expect us to hold the majority of our parliamentary seats next year, and I can point to the results in local elections and by-elections which support that view. So the current furore about Nick Clegg and the leadership of the party is, to some extent, synthetic.

It all stems from the decision by the party (yes, the party, consulted more than any party before or since) to enter coalition with the Conservatives in 2010. It wasn’t an easy decision. Many of us have spent our political lives in opposition to the Conservative Party, and we discussed openly the damage that it might do to our political fortunes. But we decided that the interests of the country, faced with the biggest economic crisis ever, had to come first. Even if it meant on occasion holding our noses on policies which we find difficult, we were determined to make the coalition work.

And, despite everything, that is what we have achieved. The recovery is now underway, thanks to the difficult decisions we have had to make. At the same time, there are distinctive Liberal Democrat policies, like taking lower paid people out of tax, like safeguarding the state pension, like greening our economy, like repealing some of the most authoritarian acts of the previous Labour government, which we have been able to bring in despite opposition from some of our conservative colleagues.

Has it been difficult? You bet. And Nick Clegg has had to face the most virulent and sustained attacks on a politician from the press and media I can remember. Throughout he has remained upbeat and resilient, in itself remarkable. Which is why the ill-advised attempts to destabilise him now are yet more difficult to justify.

But the reason is that the source of these plots and connivances are those who since raising their hands to support going into coalition have never for one moment reconciled themselves to the consequences, and have used every opportunity to carp and criticise. Indeed, I’m not sure how reporters are going to manage without the certainty of a disobliging quote from Lord Oakeshott on an almost weekly basis attacking his party colleagues. He may feel happier, if less newsworthy, now he has left.

So what’s to be done? Well, first of all, we have to communicate the fact, and it is a fact, that we as Liberal Democrats have not shifted our position or our principles. If you liked what we were saying five years ago, then rest assured we are still saying the same now. Secondly, we need to redouble our efforts to put in the work on behalf of our constituents that we are known for. It is part of our political philosophy, and I am still confident that the hard work of MPs and the intelligence and energy of young candidates like Sarah Yong in my constituency will be recognised and rewarded.

Thirdly, we mustn’t run away from our part in the government of the last four years. Many of the best policies enacted by the government have been brought in by competent and innovative Liberal Democrat ministers. Where we have disagreed with the Conservatives we should explain how and why, but do so in language which is temperate and grown-up, not the catcalls of the playground. To try to disavow our role would be futile, dishonest and self-defeating. To explain to a public still struggling to understand just how coalition politics works is both timely and necessary.

But the message we most need to get across is that when the country needed stable government, when there genuinely was no alternative other than economic chaos, we stood up to the mark. Nothing could have been more important.

**Western Daily Press**

**Wednesday 18th June 2014**

An Essex MP said to me the other day, “You know, until coming here I’d never even heard of the Somerset levels, but listening to you over the years, I feel I now know the area like the back of my hand.” That was probably his way of telling me I have been a complete bore on the subject for close on two decades, but if I don’t talk about our virtues and, occasionally, our problems, who on earth else will. A recurrent theme, of course, has been the risks of flooding and the need to properly maintain our rivers and watercourses. Indeed, I found a debate in parliament that I had called on the subject back in March 2009 where I said, “I am convinced that if we had proper dredging of some of our rivers and proper clearing of debris and strengthening of banks on some of the smaller tributary streams, it would make a substantial difference to the way in which we deal with flooding.”

I mention that not to show off as some prescient genius, given what happened this year, but simply to make the point that those of us who live and work in Somerset have been entirely consistent in our message to the Environment Agency and to successive governments. Which makes it all the more ironic how many people are now instant experts on what went wrong and what needs to be done. What a pity those same people weren’t listening to us over the years!

Now we have another report, this time by the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural affairs. It would be nice if they’d taken evidence from witnesses from Somerset who could perhaps have told them directly what it was all about – instead they interviewed the usual suspects of ministers, Lord Smith and the Environment Agency, national ‘experts’ and the like – but I think they’ve largely reached the right conclusion- that you can’t maintain a delicate and entirely artificial drainage system as we have in Somerset without ensuring you meet the costs of maintenance. They say, quite rightly, that dredging rivers isn’t the whole solution. It isn’t. It won’t stop there being floods in winter, and nor should it. But there’s a world of difference between three feet of water for three weeks and ten feet for ten weeks, and the crucial capacity the rivers Parrett and Tone provide when they’re not silted up is what gets the water away.

The good news is that I think that message has now sunk home. The attention we were given this year, and thank goodness we at least had some time in the limelight before the Thames valley suffered its brief flooding episode, has meant that we’ve been able to exert rare political leverage. And the plans that have largely been drawn up locally make sense. The dredging has started, although I don’t think it is yet enough, and I certainly want to see some attention on the higher reaches around Langport and the bottleneck presented by the Great Bow Bridge. Work is being done on the bigger price ticket items like the Parrett Sluice and increasing the capacity of the Sowey. We need definite go-aheads on those in a few months’ time. I’m even hopeful of moving to a CAP system that encourages sustainability, retaining water before it even gets down to the levels basin.

Then there are the other, smaller and more local schemes which are being properly looked at for the first time. A bank to protect Thorney. Action to ensure at least one road is kept open to Muchelney. Finding out what went wrong at Beer Walls and how we prevent flooding at Aller. None of them big projects, but all crucial to the people who live in those communities.

But key to the future is the suggestion of a Somerset Rivers Authority, formed from the two drainage boards, and with sufficient income to ensure that the system is maintained properly. We can’t, it is clear, rely on a national agency with other priorities like the Environment Agency to do that for us, and in any case the best understanding and experience of managing our watercourses is here in Somerset. We need, however, a change in the arrangements to ensure that happens. DEFRA ministers understand that. So do our local authorities. Those who don’t (and yes, I‘m looking at you, Mr Pickles) need to be brought into line, and fast.

The one message that has really got through this year is that the Somerset levels don’t look after themselves. It is a man-made environment. The rivers are higher than the surrounding land, so if you want to get water away, you need to pump it and you have to have capacity in the rivers to pump it into. Sadly, too many so-called experts have got this wrong over the years. They have, and I think this is a heresy, seen the rivers themselves as the environmental focus rather than the land between. They forgot the way the rivers used to be managed, even sold off the kit that used to do it, and we have paid the price as a consequence.

The levels and moors are a hugely precious landscape. In environmental terms they are priceless. But so are the communities and the people who live there. If we manage things properly, we can look after both. But that needs local knowledge, it needs enough funding, and it needs the application of a fair dollop of common sense. I think we’re well on the way to getting, belatedly, all three, but I won’t be confident until I see the results in place. And I say this to colleagues in government. It may flood in Somerset next winter even with your best endeavours. But if you have let us down, don’t expect us to sit quietly and take it. We want evidence that lessons have been learnt, and things are underway. Anything less would be a betrayal.