
NICK CLEGG SPEAKS AT THE CAMBRIDGE UNION

“In politics you can either do nothing and remain pure, or you can get stuff done”

On the 27th April 2016, the Cambridge Union Society welcomed the former leader of the Liberal Democrats and Deputy Prime Minister (2010-2015), Nick Clegg MP. The discussion focused around the upcoming referendum on British membership of the European Union, as well as the Liberal Democrats’ record in the coalition government of 2010-2015.

Mr Clegg began his speech with the question of why Britain’s attitude towards sovereignty and the EU is so different to that taken by other European states: “Given that so many aspects of the EU have been shaped in the British image, why do we deny the fruits of our own handiwork?” he asked. He noted that this is particularly ironic given how in many ways the ‘European project’ was spearheaded by Britain, to the scepticism of countries such as France and Germany.

Mr Clegg argued that after the Second World War Britain made the mistake of relying on the ‘special relationship’ with the United States at the expense of developing closer ties to Europe. He saw the national decline of the UK as causing a great loss of British self-confidence, only exacerbated by Britain’s double rejection when it requested to join the then-EEC.

Mr Clegg linked the history of Britain’s relationship with Europe with current Eurosceptic attitudes through the argument that when Britain originally joined the European project, it was from a position of weakness, and this still shapes our perception of European membership as implying that we are too weak to “go it alone”.

Mr Clegg then made his case for Britain remaining in the EU, with the affirmation that “the modern world requires supranational solutions” to issues such as climate change and market regulation. Therefore, he argued, EU membership is not an inhibition of sovereignty but an extension of it. When asked by Union President, Charlotte Ivers, what we could expect in the first month after a Brexit, Mr Clegg replied that we would most likely be a “rollercoaster ride” of market volatility, currency depreciation and an incontrovertible case for a second Scottish independence referendum.

Discussion then turned from Europe to the results of the last election and of the record of the Liberal Democrats. He argued that in delivering a Conservative majority, “the election had a very conventional outcome but masked an unconventional state of politics” that produced “bad
government” He explained this statement with the examples of the gulf between percentage of votes and Commons seats, and the single party state that is now Scotland.

When asked about the causes of the Liberal Democrats’ huge losses in 2010, Mr Clegg replied, citing examples from elsewhere in Europe, that smaller parties tended to get “absolutely hammered” in future elections, due to the necessity for compromise being perceived by voters as a “betrayal” and causing a “blurring of identity”. However, he also argued that the idea that parties such as his own should not go into government is a “depressing idea”, and that politics was “a marriage of high ideals and grubby reality” that necessitated compromise, a fact not often recognised by voters.

Finally, Charlotte Ivers asked Mr Clegg what he was most proud of during his time in government, to which he replied that it was the education changes he was able to make in his first years as Deputy Prime Minister, and in particular to free school meals and support for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

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