

HAPPENINGS

Newsletter for the Dundee Liberal Democrat Association

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Spring Conference in Dundee LIBERAL DEMOCRATS ARE GAINING AND CHANGING LOCAL POLITICS



Ed stopped by to say hello! From left: Michael, Lewis, Fraser, Ed, Daniel, Arietta, Jonathan and Craig.

The news could not have been better on the opening day of the Spring Conference in Dundee: Fiona Bennett’s strong win of a brand new council seat in Edinburgh was greeted with excitement and hope. In front of a jubilant audience, the Leader of the Scottish Liberal Democrats Alex Cole-Hamilton, declared: “This is just the latest seat we have captured from the SNP and it will not be the last.”

The result in Edinburgh has given a welcome boost to the new “150 and rising” - strategy, launched in Hamilton last year by Alex. The aim is the get 150 new councillors elected across Scotland in 2027, a massive increase to the 87 that were elected in May 2022. It has the full support of the Leader of the Lib Dems, **Ed Davey**. “In your local parties: what have you done and what are you going to do to get behind Alex’s fantastic strategy? If you take nothing else from the Conference, let it be this: go and find more brilliant candidates now, way ahead of next elections and follow Alex’s awesome lead,” said Ed.



Fraser welcomed Conference participants to Dundee

JOHN MORRISON MEMORIAL AWARD

Our hard working Dundee Liberal Democrat leader Fraser Macpherson received a well deserved John Morrison Memorial Award at the Conference.

Fraser has been a councillor for Dundee West End since 2001 and he has topped the poll in all six council elections he has contested. The John Morrison Memorial Award is presented for outstanding leadership, dedication and success in local government. Fraser was delighted to be awarded this at the conference but said:

“This award is for the whole Dundee team and our continuing growth and local government success in Dundee.”

FROM ENVIRONMENT AND ENERGY TO MENTAL HEALTH

The main auditorium was a hive of activity for two days. Issues from environment and energy to mental health, schools and immigration were all debated. There was no shortage of speakers and many were willing to share their own personal experiences.

“I had not planned to speak at conference about this” was an often heard sentiment. Many marched to ask for a speaker’s card spontaneously and spoke with passion about issues they strongly believe in.

Motions, if accepted, will become party policy and that’s why voting for/against is an important part of the party business. Most motions were accepted after speakers had stated their support, however, one amendment was rejected with one vote. It was so close that votes were counted twice.

There were emergency motions too. **Alistair Carmichael** MP and 20 other members submitted a motion against the Conservative government’s alarming Illegal Migration Bill. The motion called the Bill to be scrapped immediately and the Conference agreed.

Another emergency motion, submitted by **Willie Rennie** MSP, wanted to raise awareness of violence in Scottish schools. According to trade union Unison, 22,507 violent incidents were recorded by Scotland’s 32 councils between April 2021 and March 2022 with the majority against teachers and teaching assistants. The level of violence has increased since pandemic. The conference noted that there is a conspiracy of silence and of under reporting among the Scottish political and education leadership and that the current approach is not working. Investment in core education provision and support/resources is badly needed.

From left: Michael, Lewis, Jonathan, Craig and Fraser with the JMM award.



THE PRICE OF DEFENDING DEMOCRATIC VALUES MIGHT BE YOUR LIFE

Kira Rudik, leader of the Ukrainian liberal party Golos, says this is what Ukrainians are willing to pay



There was no doubt who was the most anticipated guest speaker at the Conference. “Slava Ukraini! Heroyam Slava!” echoed in the main hall, when Kira Rudik was welcomed to the stage.

Many were deeply moved by her account of the events of February 24th 2022 when Russia attacked Kyiv for the first time. This surprise attack came early in the morning, at 5 am. Nobody had expected Putin to target Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine, but as soon as it happened there was fear that Putin was planning a coup and that Russian troops would try to kill president **Volodymyr Zelenskyy**.

“At times like this the parliament must meet to declare that the country is under martial law,” Rudik explained. Party leaders urgently called MPs to see how many could come to

Verkhova Rada, the parliament building in Kyiv, which is located in an open space in a park in the city centre, an easy target for Russian bomber pilots. Rudik described the total chaos in Kyiv; how people were trying to get out and many roads were closed. It wasn't clear if MPs would actually be able to physically reach the parliament building. But they also had to do so in secrecy.

“We send a message for everyone to come to a place near the parliament and wait there until a signal is given,” Rudik tells the story. Finally, 400 MPs out of 440 managed to get inside the building. They moved in darkness through underground tunnels into the chambers.

After declaring martial law, the MPs made a statement for Ukrainians to be united and fight. Political disagreements were instantly forgotten when the MPs held hands and sang the national anthem.

“We made a vow that no matter how long this will last, we will stand united and work as one for Ukraine,” Rudik said. “We all have a desire to live in our own country, to decide our own future and to win the war. Only after this is over, we will again have the luxury to have political debates.” Now the parliament meets every other week in secrecy.

According to Rudik, the war has taught three lessons: humanity, leadership and how we are all connected. “The lesson of humanity is that we have seen how amazing people from the whole world have been. People from other countries have seen something in us that is the same as in themselves. A price has been put on the values. A price has been put on things you believe in and the price is sometimes as high as your own life.”

Above all, Ukrainians have a strong European identity. The fact that Ukraine is not yet a full members state of the EU, is not important at this juncture. The Ukrainians feel that the country is on a superfast lane to become one and the rest is just paperwork, Rudik says.

She made it clear that Ukrainians are very grateful for all the help they have received from around the world. Rudik is aware that **Boris Johnson** might not be the hero in the minds of British people, but he is particularly popular in Ukraine. So much so, that there is even a burger named after him.

Is sustainable peace possible?

Even though the world woke up to the Russian intentions only a year ago, she stressed that Ukraine had already been at war for the past 9 years before the current Russian offensive. This has made Ukrainians very wary of the prospect of achieving sustainable peace.

“How can we make sure that Russia will not attack us again?” she asks.

She also has a word of warning: many undemocratic, autocratic regimes are watching the war in Ukraine.

“These regimes are watching and waiting to see if democratic countries break down. Then it would become normal to attack your neighbour and grab a piece of land.”

Rudik worries about the next generation. Children, who have now seen dead bodies, who do their homework in bomb shelters and who have had to become refugees. The damage will be long lasting and very difficult to repair. But she firmly believes that the day will come when Kyiv will have a victory parade on its streets. Until then, the fight goes on.

Outi Bourke

Kira Rudik is the leader of our sister party, Golos (also known as Holos). It is the first liberal party to be elected to the Ukrainian parliament. The party won 20 MPs in the 2019 parliamentary elections. Rudik is also a Vice President of ALDE (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe) since 2022.



SOS FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Scottish university students are experiencing serious financial difficulties and they need urgent help, warns Dr Lewis Miller from Dundee Liberal Democrats.

Dr Miller’s motion on “Taking action on a cost of learning crisis” cited statistics which reveal the extent of despair: 12 % of students in Scotland have experienced homelessness, 35% have considered withdrawing from their studies due to financial difficulties and a quarter have been unable to pay their rent. There is an urgent need to increase financial support and put other measures in place to help students finish their degrees.

As a university lecturer himself, Dr Miller knows the plight of students in distress first hand. He has seen students breaking down and been visibly upset in his office, telling stories of not being able to make ends meet and being forced to work more and more night shifts and not being able to come to classes. “They felt excluded, ashamed, without help,” Dr Miller says. Many are also forced to live with their parents in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen as they cannot afford to live in these cities. The Scottish government could also do much more to aid coordination by encouraging institutions to collaborate in sharing and developing best practice to resolve the crisis. Students also need easily accessible information about how to access financial assistance.

Cllr **Daniel Coleman** spoke for the motion. “It’s essential that all students can enjoy the full range of experiences university education has to offer. Students must be able to prioritise university and put all their efforts into achieving the best result they can - not splitting their focus on having to hold down multiple jobs and worry about paying the week’s rent,” he said.



WHISKY TASTING NOTES: POMEGRANATE, BUBBLEGUM OR OAK?



Expert guidance from Alistair Carmichael MP led us to the world of tasting whisky, kindly provided by Kingsbarns distillery. You need a good nose, said Alistair and that was certainly true as everyone tried their best to sniff if there was fruit, berries or any other delicious notes in their wee dram. Thank you to Alistair for hosting! We raised £660 for the DLDA.



BREXIT SEPARATED FAMILIES - MINE INCLUDED

by Arietta Knežević

Arietta, a member of DLDA, spoke for the first time at Conference. She was supporting the motion on Scotland, the United Kingdom and Europe, which urged Lib Dems to underline how Brexit has harmed the interests of people who live and work in Scotland. Arietta has personal experience about this and wanted to share her story. Everything didn't go quite as planned as she had barely started her speech when she suddenly fainted.

Attending my first ever party conference here in Dundee was an amazing experience. It was great to catch up with some familiar faces, meet so many new like-minded people and hear some wonderful speeches, especially, of course, **Kira Rudik**. My own speech, somewhat predictably, did not go quite as well as Kira's. Unfortunately, on the way up to the podium, I fell over a bag on the floor and, after a brief few seconds where I thought I wouldn't be able to walk to the podium, perhaps unwisely, decided to attempt my speech anyway. The pain (which I found out the next day at Ninewells was thanks to a partial dislocation and some nasty tendon and ligament injuries) soon proved too much. The next thing I knew, I woke up on stage to a first responder and some very concerned hotel staff around me. Regardless, I got up and tried again, and, despite having to read most of my speech from my notes, finally managed to speak.

I spoke in support of a motion calling on the UK government to declare that the era of Brexit is over, and the party to put our European future at the heart of our campaigning. I speak to many people who consider Brexit an ideological issue that has little real effect on us, and as a party increasingly focused on people and real lived experience over macroeconomics, I was concerned that people might be inclined to want to push Brexit aside in favour of other issues that they may consider to have more of an impact on our everyday lives.

My speech was focused on family separations caused by Brexit, including my own, many of which happened due to CoViD travel bans overlapping with Brexit deadlines. While my husband and I were lucky enough to be able to afford to elope to a third country to get out of the vicious circle of bureaucracy we were thrown into, many people cannot, meaning other families and couples still find themselves indefinitely separated. I urged conference to consider this when voting, and stand against these separations by loudly and proudly rejecting Brexit.

Despite the initial chaos in my first attempt, I'm glad that I could take the opportunity to bring this issue to the attention of those in attendance. If even one person who was unaware of family separations caused by Brexit left conference a little more determined to bring it to an end, it was worth it.



First time in Conference: Reflections on Constitutional Future of Scotland

by John Bourke

On the last day of the Conference, on Saturday afternoon, I went to the Law Society sponsored presentation on the Constitutional Future of Scotland. This was my first time attending the Conference and I didn't have much idea what to expect as I had never previously been to a political occasion of any description.

However, I really enjoyed the Conference: tough issues were not ducked and there was no grandstanding. The respect for differing points of view felt like democracy was alive and well and I came away far more persuaded that the Lib Dems is my political home than I had felt upon arrival. For me, one of the most interesting events was the Law Society frindge meeting.

I soon realised that I knew almost nothing about this topic other than regarding Scottish independence as a disastrous economic path and a sad end to the United Kingdom. I also knew that Lib Dems supported 'federalism' and that this word means a lot of different things in different contexts.

I was constantly thinking "I must remember that" during the three presentations. It was very refreshing to see and hear such political depth and such respect for us as the audience. Points I took away include:

1. Although support for independence may have peaked below 50%, that doesn't mean that support for unionism exceeds 50%.
2. It's important to root constitutional change in the general respect Liberals have for individuals and communities, including nations, rather than seeking an emotional, romantic version of Scotland.
3. Few participants thought Holyrood needed a second chamber but they did think the committee system was not functioning properly as a relatively non-partisan method for holding the executive to account and improving legislation.



4. In the short term, pragmatic improvement of devolved Government institutions was probably the best policy goal. Longer term policy could develop as more clarity emerges about the constitutional priorities of the Scottish people assuming it does indeed become increasingly clear that independence is not the likely final destination.

The low level of current demand for regional autonomy in England does potentially make for serious imbalance in a four nation federation. There are signs that this may changing in areas such as Manchester and Teeside.