SIR ED DAVEY, MP

SUNDAY WITH LAURA KUENSSBERG, 24TH SEPTEMBER 2023

SIR ED DAVEY MP
Leader of the Liberal Democrats

VD: Their party conference started yesterday in Bournemouth. Sir Ed Davey has come to join us and to talk to you today. Good morning.

ED: Good morning. Nice to be on the show.

VD: Thank you very much for being here. Can we start with a word cloud please, done by the public opinion research group, More in Common. They asked this question and we’ll show it to our viewers now. What does Ed Davey stand for? There it is. They’ve got absolutely no idea. What do you think of that?

ED: Well, I’m glad I’m on your show to be able to explain what I stand for and in the general election I’m sure people will hear. And it’s about, for example, improving our health service and our care system, it’s about helping people with the cost of living. They’re in real - struggling with mortgages and rents. They need to look at parties saying how they are going to help them. It’s on the environment where we, for example, led the campaign against the awful sewage dumping. So, we’re getting over our ideas. Is there work to do? You’re absolutely right, Victoria.

VD: Well, you’ve been leader for three years, they’ve got no clue about you.

ED: Winning by-elections, as your clip showed, we’ve been having success. Where people have heard our message, particularly in Conservative heartlands, people have been switching to us. I’m really proud of what my colleagues have been doing up and down the country. Because it’s not just in those by-elections that you
showed, where we were persuading lifelong Conservatives to vote for us, it’s also been in council elections across the whole United Kingdom, where we’ve been defying the polls, defying what our opponents and people have said about us, and actually winning. Because people have been hearing our message, won’t say don’t know, they say yes please. And they’ve been voting for our parliamentary candidates and our council candidates.

VD: Let’s have a look then in more detail at some of your policies. Housing, massive issue...

ED: Yes, huge.

VD: ...for renters, for people wanting to buy. In 2021 you said, or your party said, your policy was aiming to build 380,000 new homes a year. This year you scrapped that target, you said you’re going focus instead on council housing, and social housing, and you’re committing to 150,000 of those homes a year. Is that enough?

ED: Yes, well, we’re debating this actually on Monday at Bournemouth, exactly...

VD: What do you think?

ED: ...this issue. And I think we do need a target for social housing. That’s something that—

VD: Why is 150,000 enough?

ED: Well, that’s on social housing. We want to build more houses with the private sector but on the social housing I’m really glad you’ve picked that up. My wife is a councillor in my constituency and she’s got the lead on housing in the council. And she’s now developing the largest council house building project we’ve had for over 40 years. And it’s that sort of investment in local communities
to provide the affordable housing that the Liberal Democrats stand for.

VD: Right, because the Housing Federation says we need £300,000 pounds - sorry, 300,000 homes a year. The government targets are needed to focus people’s minds, to focus private developers’ minds, to make that happen.

ED: Well, we have a target on social housing, which is what’s not being built at the moment.

VD: I’m asking about—

ED: Yes, I’m coming to that but it’s really important to make the point we do have a target on social housing because that has been the sector that’s seen nowhere near enough investment over many, many, many years.

VD: And if you don’t qualify for social housing?

ED: Well, first of all, if you do build council houses, and this is often not understood, you free up a lot of houses in the private rented sector.

VD: Just like that?

ED: Well, yes, let— Again, it’s really important, it’s a problem across the whole country. Councils over recent years have had to because they’ve not had enough council houses, put people who needed housing in the private rented sector. And we’ve now seen the private rented sector, because of the Conservative policies, contract. Councils are now having to spend huge amounts of money, going over budget, by putting people in temporary accommodation in hotels. So, our policy was actually really good
value for money, providing proper council houses so councils could house people.

VD: You keep focusing on council houses. I absolutely understand the reasons why. Let me ask the question—

ED: Please can I—?

VD: Why have you got rid of the 300,000 target?

ED: Well, we think top-down targets lead to developer-led approaches, as we’ve seen with Conservatives. And what you see with the developer-led approach is you see the wrong houses being built in the wrong places. Don’t take my word for it, that was what Theresa May said. And what we— Our approach, and it’s been tried, and it’s worked, is a community-led approach.

VD: What does that mean?

ED: Well, it means you have things like local neighbourhood plans, we legislated for those.

VD: So, that means the community can object to planning.

ED: Well, actually the community’s involved in the whole stage.

VD: Sure, which means they can object and stop houses being built.

ED: And they can in the developer-led model. But in the community-led model you take them with you. And let me explain where it’s been done and why it’s worked so well.

VD: Briefly please.
ED: It results in houses that people want, in the places they want, with the infrastructure they want. So often you hear that people are objecting, not to houses, but they’re objecting to the fact there’s not enough GPs, there are not enough schools, that the water infrastructure can’t take the new homes. So, a community-led approach means you’re not just thinking about the houses but you’re thinking about the whole community infrastructure. That’s what’s been missing and that’s what we’re keen to deploy.

VD: Okay. I mean is what you’re saying really, this policy is about appealing to Conservative voters, in Conservative constituencies, that you are targeting as we head to the next election?

ED: I actually think our policies on the health service, on the environment—

VD: I’m asking you about housing in Conservative constituencies.

ED: Well, I mean I think they are popular amongst many people. I think our council house building project—

VD: You keep talking about the council house policy. We’ve talked about that, we know what the target is.

ED: But you asked—

VD: I’m asking you - Lib Dems have had success campaigning...

ED: Yes, we have.

VD: ...in Conservative constituencies where you’ve campaigned against local housing developments. Is that what this is about? Be straight.
ED: No, no, it's absolutely not about that. What we said, for example, in the Chesham and Amersham by-election that we won, and people said we were against houses everywhere. What we were against was developer-led model. And I can't stress this enough. When you take communities with you, you do see more houses being built. Again, don't take my word for it. There was a report done by the government department responsible that showed that the neighbourhood planning that Liberal Democrats wanted and want now, leads to more houses being built.

VD: Okay.

ED: But they have the support that they need from the local people.

VD: Let’s talk about relations with the EU. In 2019 you branded yourself, the Lib Dems, as the stop Brexit party. Now you’re saying people on the doorstep aren’t talking about Brexit. Are you going to go quiet on it as well?

ED: Well, I think we’re talking a lot about it at our conference. Quite rightly - you’re right that we did fight against Brexit and we voted against the trade deal that Boris Johnson bought, it was a disastrous deal but we were the only ones to vote against it, Labour didn’t. And we voted against it because we knew it would damage our economy, our farmers and so on.

VD: I’m talking about now. What’s the position now?

ED: Well, it’s because of that history that I’m very happy to tell you we remain very pro-European. We want Britain to be at the heart of Europe but we’re also deeply realistic about what’s going to have to be done to enable us to improve our relations with Europe. Unfortunately, this Conservative government has so soured our relations, European politicians don’t trust the UK any more. And that’s a very sad position and it’s against our national interest. So,
the next parliament, the next government, has got to engage with Europe in a way that this government isn’t doing.

VD: So, the Lib Dems support, unless you’ve changed this, a longer term objective of UK membership of the EU. Is that still the position?

ED: Well, I’ve been really clear that Britain must be at the heart of Europe.

VD: Does that mean rejoining?

ED: What it means is we’ve got to start where we are at the moment and rebuild those relationships.

VD: Okay.

ED: At the moment, European politicians are not listening to the UK and that’s damaging our industry—

VD: And you’re deflecting the question. Is the Lib Dem’s position that ultimately you want to rejoin the EU?

ED: Well, that’s currently not on the table.

VD: I’m asking you - no, I know it’s not on the table. I’m asking you what your policy is.

ED: Well, I’m telling you that in our manifesto, in our pre-manifesto debate at Bournemouth, we are focusing in on what’s got to be done over the next five years to strengthen our economy, to strengthen our security, because we’re not co-operating with Europe as we should be on tackling crime. That’s a disgrace.
So, I really want— Liberal Democrats really want is to completely rebuild that trust, rebuild that relationship, so we can be at the heart of Europe. That is going to take time. We have to take the British people with us. We have to convince European politicians that we’re serious because they feel very let down. And it’s damaged our economy so badly that we’re going to have to take time to rebuild that—

VD: And some of your supporters feel let down because they want you to be absolutely clear, yes, we the Lib Dems will rejoin Europe.

ED: Well, I—

VD: They will, you know, maximise public support for rejoining the EU.

ED: Yes, well, I think when people hear our policies they really get that we are the pro-European party. We’re the only party that - I think this is really fair to focus on—

VD: Can you just say out loud, yes, the Lib Dems want to rejoin the EU?

ED: Well, what I will tell you is our policy. We’ve passed it at our conference—

VD: Right—

ED: We have a four—

VD: You won’t say the words, though, it’s so weird.

ED: Well, it’s not weird at all because what I’m focusing in on is how we rebuild that relationship. And it’s a four stage approach. I can take you through the details—
VD: No, I mean we haven’t got time for four stages. You have made that point.

ED: But it’s a very detailed, and it’s a very good policy.

VD: Okay, coming to the end of our conversation. You obviously were in coalition government with the Conservatives in 2010, you were a minister, cabinet secretary. That was five years, it cost you massively in the 2015 election. You’ve already you wouldn’t do any deal with the Tories ever again, as far as I can see. What about a potential deal with Labour in the scenario of a hung parliament?

ED: Well, you’re right to say that there’s no way we could deal with the Conservatives.

VD: I’m asking about Labour now.

ED: I’m coming to that. They’ve ruined our country. I’ve fought them all my life. I fought them actually in—

VD: You were in government with them.

ED: Yes, and I fought them in government every day. For example, we managed to make Britain the world leader in offshore wind...

VD: Let’s no go over 13 years ago.

ED: ...and the Tories fought that. But I mean at the moment I’m just focused on removing lots of Conservative MPs and electing as many Liberal Democrat MPs as we can. That’s why we’re focusing on the NHS, focusing on the cost of living, focusing on the environment. And I—

VD: Would you go into coalition government with Labour?
ED: One thing I’ve noticed in politics—

VD: One thing I’ve noticed is you’re not wanting to answer this question.

ED: No, well, I’m going to if you give me a chance. I’ve looked at predecessors, I’ve been in politics a long time, I’ve worked with a lot of Liberal Democrat leaders. And when they have focused on that question they’ve been distracted from the task in hand. And the task that I set myself when I became leader of the Liberal Democrats was to beat as many Conservative MPs as possible and get the Conservatives out of government. And that is what I’m going to focus on. I’m not going to be distracted. And the more Liberal Democrat MPs we have in the next parliament, the more influential we can be.

VD: Thank you very much for being with us.

ED: Thank you.

VD: Thank you.

ENDS