

Business as usual

During the four months since the General Election, the Liberal Democrat party seemed to have vanished from everyone's radar following its drubbing at the polls. This week, however, the party has held its annual conference and so for the first time in ages, we were treated to the mellifluous tones of outgoing leader Nick Clegg on the BBC's World at One.

It was really like putting the clock back. Here was Cleggie still on his high horse, full of the same old apocalyptic scare stories about leaving the EU – very much business as usual, in other words. We would be “isolated”, “cut off from the world”, “wholly irrelevant” and so on. Real vintage Clegg twaddle. If the UK was some tiny atoll populated by 200 inhabitants stuck out in the ocean three thousand miles from our nearest neighbour speaking a language incomprehensible to the rest of the world, there might be some truth in his remarks.

In reality, leaving the EU would give us more clout; we could regain our seat on the world's top tables – the ones that really count like the WTO and UNECE. We would not be under the thumb of the European Court of Justice and, of course, we would still be an influential member of NATO, we would still have our seat at the UN, we would still be one of the world's top 10 economies, Dover would still be only 21 miles from Calais and our native tongue, English, would remain the official language of more countries in the world than any other. Hardly an irrelevant country in most people's books

This speech was in keeping with a Lib Dem tradition of giving recently departed leaders a platform at the party conference. Is it to be his swansong? Hard to say, but even if it is, his successor Tim Farron seems set to carry on the great Clegg tradition. In fact, he improved on it. We would become an “impoverished backwater” if we left the EU. Oh yes, Mr Farron,

like those poor countries Norway and Switzerland. There would be massive unemployment, he went on to say. Well fine, let's go the whole hog and join the Euro; maybe our unemployment figures might then end up like Greece's instead of a mere 5.6% – the fourth lowest in the 28-nation bloc.

We've heard this rubbish time after time and rebuttal isn't really that difficult. The only new string to the Lib Dem bow is they are now claiming that the UK would split up if we left as Scotland would want to remain in the EU. This scare story will doubtless be repeated *ad infinitum* as the older ones are beginning to sound a bit hollow – almost laughably so. Can it too be knocked on the head?

First of all, it has to be admitted that a higher percentage of Scots are in favour of remaining in the EU than Englishmen and the SNP leadership is particularly keen. On the other hand, a contact within Scotland has informed us that many rank-and-file supporters of Scottish independence also favour independence from the EU.

In other words, the clamour for Scottish independence may not be affected by a "leave" vote in the forthcoming referendum. Furthermore, the prospect of a weak and divided Labour party being trounced by the Conservatives at the 2020 General Election would lead to a call for another independence referendum even if the UK voted to stay in. The Scots, it seems, have become incurably allergic to Conservatives and if they are likely to be in power for a further decade in Westminster, this will further strengthen the SNP's hand come what may.

Another factor to consider is that we are a long way from the formal referendum campaign. We do not know how Cameron is going to play it, nor what his "renegotiation" will claim to have achieved, although some form of associate membership – permanent second class status within the EU – is a distinct possibility. Opinion polls, whose credibility has taken a

further knock recently after getting the results of Sunday's Greek election wrong, are no guide to how people will vote in two years' time when the landscape could be very different.

Ironically, a "leave" vote may actually benefit the Union. If we vote out in 2017 and our Article 50 period expires in 2019, it is most likely going to be a further two years at least before a further referendum will be held in Scotland. With the EEA/EFTA independence route likely to be economically neutral at first and with only two years to have begun the massive process of reviewing the laws on our statute books and repealing or revising those not in our national interest, there will be no economic bonanza in this period, but it will be long enough for everyone both sides of the border to realise that the sky hasn't fallen in and that the fears stoked up by Clegg, Farron and co were groundless.

Independence will give us all a spring in our step, just like the nations of Eastern Europe in the period after 1989. The joy in the "leave" camp will be infectious. Add to this a few hints that one of the top policy priorities for the newly-independent UK will be the replacement of the Common Fisheries Policy and who knows, the Scots, who are fiercely proud of their fishing industry, may come to realise where their bread is really buttered.

Meanwhile in their parallel universe, Messrs Clegg and Farron will continue to warn of the forthcoming armageddon.....