

Marie Goldman

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Time to call a national emergency over the small boat crossings crisis

IT'S political party conference season and I've just returned from the Liberal Democrats' Autumn Conference in Bournemouth.

For people who aren't involved in politics, party conferences often seem like a pretty strange concept. I know because I used to see them that way too.

What on earth makes several thousand people from all over the nation give up their weekends (and a day or two either side), and travel for several hours to gather together by the seaside to discuss politics?

Well, I can't speak for the other parties, but I can tell you that from a Liberal Democrat perspective, it's because we're brimming with ideas about the future of our country, and party conference is a great opportunity to talk about those ideas, and vote on what becomes official party policy.

But it's a time to reconnect with old friends too. It's a time to compare notes about how things are going, to remind ourselves why we spend so much of the rest of the year knocking on doors and talking to people – because Liberal Democrats have a positive vision for our country.

Yes, we know there are a lot of things that need to be fixed, and we know lots of people are struggling and frustrated – angry, even – about successive governments' failure to fix them. But we believe they can indeed be fixed and we've got lots of ideas about how to do that.

Let's start with immigration. Hardly an hour seems to go by without it being discussed on the news, and for understandable reasons. The stark images of hundreds of people making the perilous journey across the English Channel in small, overloaded and unseaworthy inflatable boats are symbolic of failed policies from both the current government and the previous one.

Small boat crossings didn't used to be a thing, but because governments have pressed ahead with badly-thought-through policies, we have reached a crisis point in the minds of much of the public. The country is demanding change and I



The Liberal Democrats' Autumn Conference in Bournemouth
PHOTOS: MARIE GOLDMAN MP



Marie Goldman MP met
Asthma and Lung UK



Marie Goldman MP
at the conference
in Bournemouth



Marie Goldman MP met
with the MS Society

agree with them.

Before Brexit, when the UK was part of the EU, it used to be a lot easier to return asylum seekers to the country they had come from, under a system called the Dublin agreement. When we left the EU, that agreement came to an end and, for a long time, nothing was put in its place. Now we have a tiny handful of bilateral arrangements with other countries, but nothing anywhere near as comprehensive.

Meanwhile, the Conservatives invested hundreds of millions of pounds (reportedly £700 million!) in the hair-brained, doomed-to-fail Rwanda scheme, which only ever managed to deport four volunteers.

Meanwhile, the previous government appeared to stop processing asylum applications altogether, leading to the enormous backlog of about 90,000 people we see in the

asylum system today. But despite what some might have us believe, it isn't the European Court of Human Rights (the ECHR) that's stopping us from fixing this – it's government incompetence and the lack of a truly workable plan that recognises the urgency of the issue.

But the Liberal Democrats have a plan – we want the Government to declare a national emergency. This would allow us to direct and mobilise lots of resources into tackling the asylum backlog. If necessary, this would include setting up 'Nightingale' asylum processing centres – temporary centres where asylum claims could be quickly processed and decisions made about who has a genuine right to stay in the UK and who doesn't.

Those who don't should then be returned to their country of origin as quickly as possible, and those who do can then be allowed to work, to contribute to our society, to pay taxes, contribute to society and fill job vacancies in places that are crying out for more workforce and where we have always wanted and needed immigrants to help – places

such as the NHS, hospitality and farming where migrants are desperately needed to help pick our crops.

We have to recognise the emergency. Our policy does just that.

Conference is also about things called 'fringe events'. These are smaller meetings, away from the main auditorium, to discuss specific topics of interest. All sorts of things can be discussed and as an MP, it's hard to fit everything in so you have to prioritise what events to go to and which meeting invitations to accept.

It will hopefully surprise nobody reading this that I attended events about education, where we discussed the big challenges in things like special educational needs, the importance of extra-curricular activities, and teacher recruitment and retention.

I also discussed healthcare with the Royal College of Physicians (the RCP), who told me, worryingly, that they hadn't been able to meet with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care since just after the General Election.

Given the RCP's size, history and importance in healthcare, I find that

concerning and I intend to write to Wes Streeting to ask why not.

I met with the MS Society to talk about treatment and care for people, including many Chelmsford constituents, who have multiple sclerosis.

And I met with Asthma & Lung UK, as well as the British Dental Association.

Healthcare is a key issue for Chelmsford residents and I promised to continue to be a healthcare champion. Conference is an important opportunity to meet with those directly and indirectly involved in healthcare to understand more about what's going wrong, what's going right, and how we can bridge the gap between the two.

I've returned from conference re-energised and enthusiastic for getting things done. Yes, I know there is a lot that isn't going brilliantly in our country – indeed, across the world – but I'm confident that I'm in the only party with the ideas and the people to fix it.

Want to find out more? Check out the Liberal Democrat website here: www.libdems.org.uk.

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