

At the end of the meeting, the panel was asked who amongst current and recent Liberal Democrats most reflected the characteristics of their chosen hero. Pack chose Roy Jenkins because of his ability to achieve radical change. Dholakia agreed about Roy Jenkins, who was the first Home Secretary to introduce race relations legislation, but also stressed the importance of figures like Nancy Seear and Frank Byers. Floella Benjamin had earlier noted that, in Navnit Dholakia, the meeting had a Liberal hero amongst them. She had shared his experience of hatred earlier in her life, but on reflecting on her peerage, she had felt that she reached that position

with the help of people like Navnit Dholakia. In answering the question directly, she chose Shirley Williams whom she regarded as sharp, attentive to detail and not afraid to stand up against the tide. She was also willing to give help and advice. Finally, Matt Cole chose Vince Cable, another Yorkshireman, who was almost universally respected at the time of writing the Wainwright biography. That esteem had been tarnished a little by the effect of holding office, but Wainwright himself never had to weather the modern media storm.

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## Peace, Reform and Liberation

Conference fringe meeting, 19 September 2011, with Julian Glover, Paddy Ashdown and Shirley Williams; chair: Duncan Brack.

Report by Mark Pack

IT WOULD be a brave person who walked up to Paddy Ashdown or Shirley Williams and told them to their face that they are history, or even old, but they are two of the most charismatic, interesting and thoughtful members of the living history class – people who have been around in politics long enough to be able to talk at first hand about not only the origins of the Liberal Democrats but prior events too. So to have both on the bill at the Liberal Democrat History Group's Autumn 2011 conference fringe meeting not surprisingly resulted in a spacious room being packed, leaving people standing at the sides, the back and in the doorways. However, the star of the show in many ways was the less well-known third speaker, then of *The Guardian* and now of Downing Street, Julian Glover.

All three were introduced to the meeting by the Group's chair, and one of the lead authors of the book being launched, *Peace, Reform and Liberation*, Duncan Brack. He reassured the audience that the meeting was maintaining historical party traditions, for Paddy Ashdown was going to have to leave early ... and

Shirley Williams was late! He also quoted Paddy Ashdown's words on the importance of political history to a party, taken from his autobiography, *A Fortunate Life*, in which Ashdown recounted some of the problems of the 1989 SDP–Liberal merger. He wrote that, 'Being a relative outsider compared to the older MPs I had, in my rush to create the new party, failed to understand that a political party is about more than plans, priorities, policies and a chromium-plated organisation. It also has a heart and a history and a soul.'

The same applies to a newspaper, too, and in kicking off with the first main speech Julian Glover took a look at one part of his newspaper's history and soul – its on/off, love/hate relationship with the Liberal Party and its successors. Glover cited *The Guardian's* May 2010 editorial urging people to vote Liberal Democrat. But, as Glover added, 'As soon as we did it, we changed our minds.' That prevarication is nothing new and, he implied, not necessarily much of a problem for the party given that polling showed that Labour support amongst Guardian readers went up after that 2010 editorial.

The paper's political advice has varied much over the years. Julian Glover even located a 1950s *Guardian* editorial which urged people to vote out Clement Atlee and vote in the Conservative Party. But much of the time the paper had been a Labour-supporting outlet which urged best wishes on the Liberals and their successors, often advising the party to be just a little different in a benevolent / condescending (delete to taste) way.

Much of the editorialising about Britain's third party has been, as Glover highlighted, variants on a common theme: to bemoan that the third party is not fully backing whatever cause is of most concern to the paper at the time. The other theme, he added, is to write off the third party as doomed. On occasion, *The Guardian* has combined both themes in one leader, including in a 1987 leader that said, 'These are dire days for the Alliance. They have some of the most thoughtful and radical politicians around.' Glover added, 'As a paper we certainly seem to enjoy nothing more than praising the Liberal Party and the Liberal Democrats while going on to explain why we can't actually support it.' The party's 1992 general election manifesto received praise from the paper: 'it far outdistances its competitors with a fizz of ideas and an absence of fudge', but even that was not enough for the paper to call for Paddy to become prime minister. 'So there you have it, 150 years from *The Guardian* and the *Manchester Guardian* calling on the Liberal Party and the Liberal Democrats to be brave, radical; praising the party's policies and then writing it off as irrelevant', concluded Julian Glover.

He was followed by Paddy Ashdown, who in typical fashion strode towards the audience before starting to quiz everyone in the room, testing people's knowledge with quotes from history. After an easy duo with 'Go back to your constituencies and prepare for government' and 'I intend to march my troops towards the sound of gunfire', with the audience easily and correctly guessing (or in many cases, remembering) David Steel and Jo Grimond, Ashdown posed a tougher one with, 'Ideas are not responsible for the people who believe in them'. The answer? Paddy himself (on being particularly exasperated by Alex Carlisle). Probably.

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Left to right: Julian Glover, Shirley Williams, Duncan Brack, Paddy Ashdown (photo: Matt Cole)

He admitted he may have borrowed it from someone else and forgotten. (A search through Hansard finds him first using the phrase in Parliament 1986, in a different context and even then not sure if he had penned it himself).<sup>1</sup>

He went on to entertain and enlighten the audience with a sequence of many other quotes from past Liberals, including from Lord Acton: 'A state which is incompetent to satisfy different races, condemns itself. A state which labours to neutralise, to absorb, to expel them destroys its own vitality. A state which does not include them is destitute of the chief basis of self-government.' Acton got several mentions, with Ashdown also picking out what he described as one of his favourite quotes: 'It is easier to find people fit to govern themselves than it is to find people fit to govern'. The quote should be emblazoned across the party's political manuals, he said, making the implicit point that many of the lessons past liberal drew from their contemporary experience are still highly relevant today.

As he said, 'our history is our present' – just after quoting Gladstone on Afghanistan. Different centuries, different wars but the same humane, liberal creed: 'That philosophy of liberalism that combines a solution to the questions of liberty and freedom – and sometimes, as John Stuart Mill said, they oppose each other, the freedom to and the freedom from – you have to determine

where that balance lies for your time, for your nation and for your generation. It does not lie always in the same place. You have to determine that. That is why liberalism is a living creed.' He finished saying, 'The thing that we have in our party title – liberal – goes back thousands of years. You should be proud of that. It should give us strength, and it should make us campaign even harder ... Henry Gibson once said, 'You do not go out to battle for freedom and truth wearing your best trousers.' Sometimes I think our party wears its best trousers too much. This is our heritage and it is also our message today – and we should be proud of it'.

It would take a speaker of rare skill to match Ashdown's speech, but Shirley Williams is one of the select band who could – and did, even though she opened joking that she wished she had after all agreed to speak before rather than after him. She contrasted Ashdown's drawing of lessons from the more distant past with her own talk – looking at the lessons from more recent political history, in particular the way the limited teaching of history in the US helps shape its leaders' worldview – if you only teach American history, you end up with people who do not think much beyond the boundaries of America. This had 'devastating consequences', Shirley Williams argued, when the lessons of the Vietnam War and the state the country was left in were not applied to Iraq.

She then turned to the way the Liberal Party declined so sharply in the early twentieth century, becoming reduced to near irrelevance. 'What kept it going were the deep roots it had put down in some parts of the country – the Pennines, parts of the West Country and of course the Celtic Welsh and Scottish Liberals,' Shirley Williams explained. Her own roots, of course, are in the social democracy rather than liberalism – a distinction she described as being based on being less distrustful of the powers of the state, but also a distinction that has faded as the merged Liberal Democrats have evolved.

Returning to America and the uses of history, Williams said that lessons from the 1930s are still very relevant. One of her conclusions from them is the need to consider a job creation program, aimed particularly at young people, funded by a dedicated temporary tax. More optimistically, she thinks politicians have learnt from the 1930s that they should not 'simply take the dictation of the market without any question as to whether it is right or whether it isn't.' Then only the American President FDR amongst western leaders bucked that consensus of treating the recession as an act of inevitability, introducing instead a liberal and democratic government to fight that which other people viewed as inevitable.

The USA is also responsible for her views on coalition. Williams revealed that initially she would have preferred a minority Conservative government, with a confidence and supply arrangement rather than a formal coalition. However, she has since changed her mind, drawing on what she has seen in the USA and the dangers it shows of 'total political polarisation' stopping the government from taking necessary action in an economic crisis. As a result, she now thinks forming a coalition 'was necessary and it was right ... One had to make the political system work, even if it was painful and difficult to do so.'

Finally, looking back a century to Britain's own history, Shirley Williams said there were three failures of the Liberal Party in 1911: on gender, inequality and Ireland. 'It was appalling that Asquith consistently refused to consider suffrage for women,' she said, before stressing that in her view the party had made far too little progress in improving the diversity amongst its MPs – and has a diversity problem illustrated by the near all-white audience for the fringe meeting. The success of 'zipping' in introducing gender balance amongst the party's MEP's points the way, she said, towards the need for action in other areas.

The second failure was shown by the so-called workers' rebellion, fuelled by a dramatic drop in real wages. As with gender, this source of 1911 failure is a challenge for the modern party too, with real wages once again dropping. But on this issue Williams said the party was getting right, with its emphasis on a fairer tax system, keeping the 50 per cent tax rate and increasing the basic rate income tax allowance to £10,000. When she was first elected in 1964, the ratio between the pay of the country's leading chief executives and the average wage of people who worked in manufacturing was about 8:1 she said; now it has risen to over 80:1. 'That's not just inequality: it is appalling obscenity.'

On Ireland, Williams reminded the audience that Ireland was long a passion of William Gladstone. The tragedy of his inability to secure home rule for Ireland was a heavy burden on Britain and Ireland's subsequent histories. But, much less well known is that when in office Gladstone offered the Zulus a military alliance against the Boers. When he fell as prime minister the proposal fell apart, with huge costs to South Africa, too. On this point, Williams did not explicitly say what the lessons for modern Liberal Democrats are, the implication was left hanging in the air that it meant – at least some of the time – being willing to militarily support the oppressed. What she did say in conclusion was that history matters, for 'we must learn the lessons, even the painful ones, and not make the same mistakes again'.

In answers to questions from the audience, Ashdown agreed that Gladstone's love of thrift and voluntarism is still very relevant – environmentalism is a form of thrift and community politics is based on voluntarism. But community politics is greater than voluntarism, for community politics must also be about shifting power.

Williams agreed, saying the country was increasingly realising how unreal the New Labour economic boom had been, based on unsustainable debt producing a mirage which both the public and the government believed in. For her thrift has a moral and psychological purpose, making us more happy, she thinks, given the costs of the anxiety that comes from seeking ever-more riches rather than enjoying what you have.

On voluntarism, Williams again agreed with Ashdown, pointing to the amazing care that hospices provide, thanks to a system based on voluntarism. Repeating her high profile opposition to some aspects of the government's health reforms, she nonetheless saw a key role for such voluntarism.

The question and answer session was rather taken over by contemporary political

questions, including very strong comments about the importance of the party improving the diversity of its parliamentary party in the Commons from both Williams and Ashdown. The latter admitted to changing his mind on the topic and is now willing to support more radical temporary measures if necessary than he was when leader of the party.

Ashdown also retold a story of a meeting between Henry Kissinger and Mao Zedong. Seeking to kindle a shared interest in history to smooth the business, Kissinger asked Mao what he thought would have happened if it had been Khrushchev and not John F. Kennedy who had been assassinated. Mao pondered before saying that he doubted that nice, rich Greek ship owner

would have married Mrs Khrushchev.

Closing the meeting, Duncan Brack reminded people of the comment made by the distinguished historian and Liberal Democrat peer, the late Conrad Russell, that the party via its predecessors was probably the oldest political party in the world. This 350 years of history is captured in the new history of the party – to remember, to celebrate and to learn.

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1 <http://bit.ly/ashdown1986>

## LETTERS

### Liberal Prime Ministers

There was a reference in Kevin Theakston's article on 'The afterlives of former Liberal Prime Ministers' (*Journal of Liberal History* 71, summer 2011) to Lord John Russell and his Scottish second wife being given Pembroke House in Richmond Park, by Queen Victoria, for their lifetime use. According to Amanda Foreman in her excellent *A World on Fire* (Allen Lane/Penguin Books, London, 2010/2011), Lord John, when Foreign Secretary in 1859–65, also had the use of Abergeldie Castle (two miles from Balmoral Castle on Deeside) which Prince Albert had leased for forty years from 1840. Apparently, it was at Abergeldie that Lord John had useful informal talks, during the US Civil War, with Charles Francis Adams (son and grandson of US Presidents), the Minister at the US Legation in London.

Incidentally, Amanda Foreman also advises that the Marquis of Hartington (Liberal

Leader in the Commons 1875–80 and later Liberal Unionist Leader in the Lords) spent Christmas Day 1862 in the Confederate States of America, making eggnog for cavalry offices in General Robert E. Lee's army.

Further, not only was the 5<sup>th</sup> (Scottish) Earl of Rosebery – who sat in the Lords as 2<sup>nd</sup> (UK) Lord Rosebery, not as a Scottish representative peer – created a Knight of the Thistle on resigning as Prime Minister in 1895, he was also created 1st (UK) Earl of Midlothian, etc., in the 1911 Coronation Honours. After the former Prime Minister – who did not attend the House of Lords after 1911 – had a severe stroke in 1919, his son and heir – who was briefly Liberal National Secretary of State for Scotland in May–August 1945 – entered the House of Lords as 2<sup>nd</sup> (UK) Earl of Midlothian although his father survived until 1929. (The family is descended from