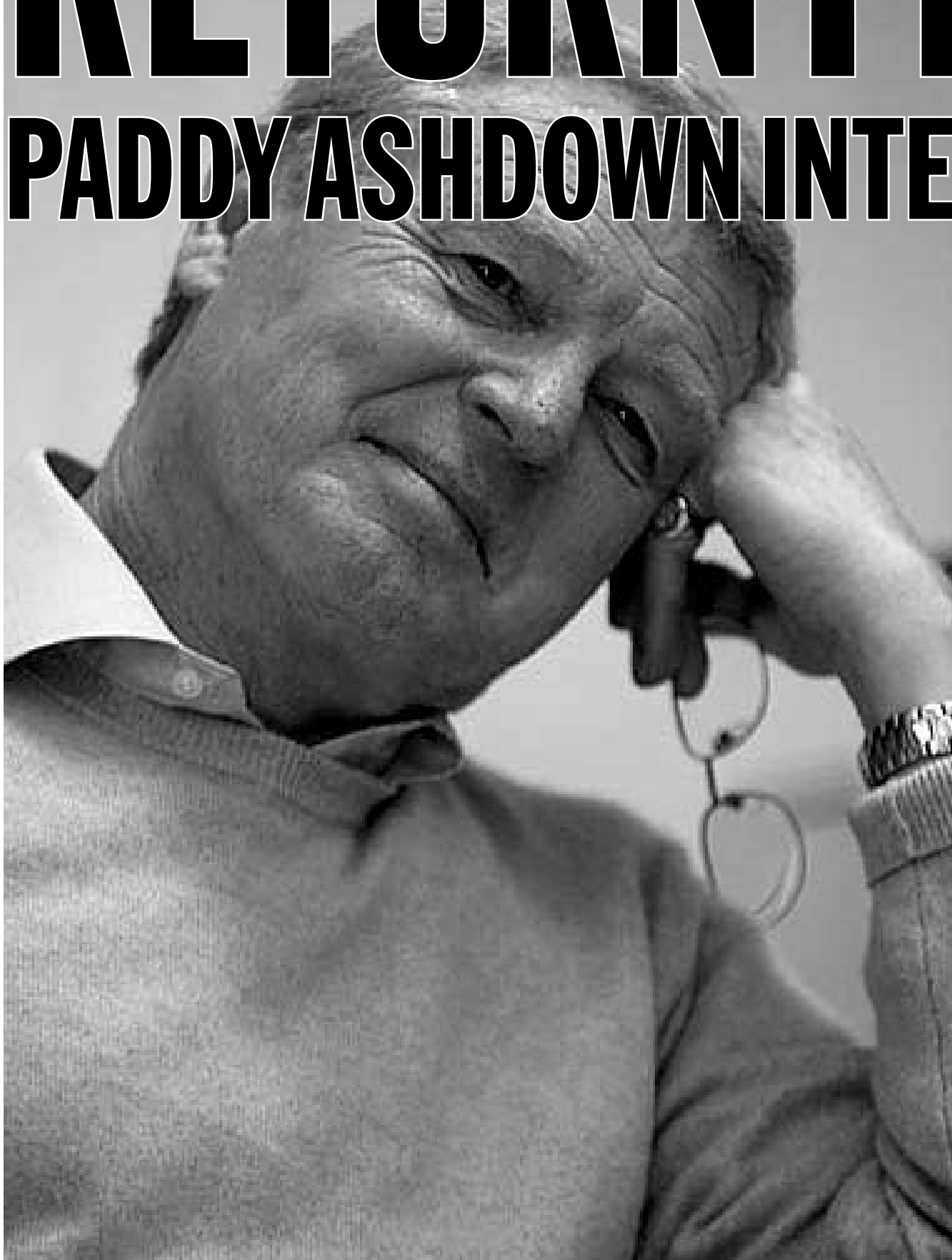


# RETURN FROM PADDY ASHDOWN INTERVIEW



# FROM BOSNIA VIEWED BY ADRIAN SLADE

It was a cold and horrible night in Blackpool in January 1988. The occasion proved to be the last-ever Assembly of the Liberal Party. The next day Liberals would vote overwhelmingly for merging their party with the SDP. After the pre-debate rally that night, and I suppose because I was party president, I found myself in the unlikely company of Jo Grimond, Roy Jenkins and Ludovic Kennedy. Ludo bought us all a drink and we were chatting about the prospects for the future when Jo suddenly said to me ‘Do you know this chap Ashdown? I understand that we may soon have our first leader to have killed somebody with his bare hands!’ An apochryphal anecdote, of course, but Jo had latched on to the fact that the MP for Yeovil had spent his earlier years as a soldier in Northern Ireland and then as a member of the Special Boat Squadron of the Royal Marines. Jo might also have added ‘... and the first leader to speak Chinese and to have been both a diplomat and a youth worker.’

That was the unusual CV of Jeremy John Durham ‘Paddy’ Ashdown, who did indeed become the first elected leader

of the newly merged party. David Steel, the architect of merger, had decided not to stand and David Owen had chosen to do a UDI from it all and go off with a rump minority of the SDP, so the field was left open for Ashdown to compete for the job with Alan Beith, the Liberal MP for Berwick-on-Tweed. He won comfortably and remained as leader for eleven years, handing over to Charles Kennedy in 1999.

Then, three years later, to his obvious surprise and delight, he was appointed High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina, an area in which he had taken an intense interest ever since the Balkans trouble began again in the early 1990s. It was an appointment made, on the recommendation of Tony Blair, by the Peace Implementation Council set up under the Dayton Peace Agreement of 1996. This council consists of all the countries that subscribed to the Dayton Agreement, including Russia and Japan. It is sanctioned by the UN Security Council and the European Union. The High Representative is answerable to both bodies and also, by his actions, to the people of Bosnia, but the agreement gives him considerable powers of direction in the setting-up of

structures for a democratic state. Paddy Ashdown succeeded three previous High Representatives, in the process becoming probably the most powerful British Liberal since Lloyd George.

I had not seen him since well before he went but he agreed to meet again shortly after his return from nearly four years in Bosnia exercising his powers. He invited me to the House of Lords – not, incidentally, a place in which he feels comfortable. I asked him first how he was finding his return to British politics?

‘I’m delighted to be back. I should be so lucky that, at the end of a life that was already fairly interesting, culminating in the undoubted pinnacle of leading the party I love for eleven years – at the end of that most people would say “that’s enough for one life” – then someone says to you: “Go off to a country you have grown attached to and know a bit about and help to build a state”. As someone who has been fascinated all my life about how you build states, combat racism and nationalism, of the kind I had seen in Northern Ireland, I could not miss an opportunity like that. By the way, what we did when we got there was apply the Lib Dem manifesto of 1992.’

**‘By the way, what we did when we got to Bosnia was apply the Lib Dem manifesto of 1992.’**

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I suggested that, when he was Liberal Democrat leader, he could not possibly have envisaged doing that job after he had finished, and he agreed emphatically that he had not. Implementing the Lib Dem manifesto also seemed a little improbable, given the substantial sole powers granted to the High Representative. I questioned whether these fitted easily with being a Liberal and a democrat, and one who had not been in government before. He saw no problem with that.

'The presumption that lies at the heart of your question is that this is an unnatural, unreasonable and unprecedented structure that you should have – after a war, an internationally managed, tutelage democracy. But it's not unnatural and unreasonable at all. It's exactly what happened in Germany. It happened in Japan. It happened in Kosovo. Quite frequently between a terrible war and the onset of democracy you have a period of physical and mental reconstruction. Don't forget that Liberals were closely involved with the reconstruction of Germany through the Allied Commission. That's why Germany has devolved government and proportional representation. It's not at all unusual for Liberals to exercise these sorts of powers and be involved in the business of state-building. If this kind of job has to be done I would rather have it done by a Liberal any day.'

Was it a lonely role?

'No, not at all. You know you have the international community behind you and you also know that you are accountable to them. Of course you have to fall back a lot on your own judgment and I think that here the skills of a politician are more useful than those of a diplomat. My predecessors were mostly diplomats. But knowing politics, knowing what makes people work, what makes states work and above all not being frightened of contention, is immensely valuable. The stuff of ambassadors is to avoid crises. The stuff of politicians is to know how

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**(Opposite page:) Ashdown as Leader; on the roof of the offices of the High Representative in Sarajevo; in Srebrenica.**

to handle them to achieve what you want. Insofar as we were successful a lot of it was to do with that fact, that I had those political skills.'

He explained the highly complex appointment and accountability structure that he had had to deal with, but he added: 'By the way, if someone had said to me "If you are managing a peace stabilisation issue would you prefer to have around you what is broadly an ad hoc international coalition of the willing or be run by the UN Department of Peace-Keeping in New York?"', there is no doubt which I would go for. Unlike my colleague in Kosovo it was comparatively easy for me to make decisions and get on with real things.'

He is a little reluctant to list his principal achievements in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which he thinks are for others to decide, but he didn't dodge my question and his answer sounds impressive. 'I set out to try and do three things. First, to make the process of building a state irreversible. In those four years we created a single judiciary, a single judicial code, a single customs service, a single army under the control of the state, a single intelligence service accountable to parliament, a single taxation service and a unified city of Mostar. By the time we left we could say that the country was well on its way to democratic statehood. My second aim was to bring the country to the threshold where it could enter the European process. That's now beginning to happen. And thirdly, to come as close as possible to getting rid of the need for a High Representative. We are not there yet, but nearly.'

And he believes that, if the EU remains true to its intention to consider the Balkan countries for entry, the structures will stand the test of time. He is disappointed that the Serbian leaders Karadic and Mladic have still not been caught but pleased that the changes in policy towards them and other potential war criminals that he helped to initiate have

already led to a number of arrests and, he believes, a change in attitudes. 'But you can't have peace without justice, so they must be caught. I don't think they can now reverse the processes in Bosnia but until that happens, they can still slow them up.'

So how do the satisfactions of those years compare with the satisfactions of leading the Liberal Democrats – or were they not comparable? And here he revealed his true feelings about the Palace of Westminster.

'Oh, they were comparable but they were very different. In this bloody awful place called parliament you run around like a white mouse in a cage and wonder what you achieve. There were not many days here when I felt I had done anything that genuinely affected ordinary people's lives, whereas in Bosnia Herzegovina you made anything up to thirty decisions a day which genuinely did affect people. That said, the pinnacle of my life was undoubtedly leading the Liberal Democrats. It's just that the day-to-day satisfactions of my job in Bosnia were probably a little higher.'

We left the Balkans and went back to where Paddy Ashdown had come from and why he had accumulated such a varied CV.

'My life has been an accident. Nothing I have done has been planned. Why did I become a soldier? Because I was eighteen, into rough and tumble, first XV, Victor Ludorum at the athletics – I was fascinated by the romance of it. Why did I leave the services in 1970 to become a diplomat? Because I'd studied Chinese and Malay, I had seen a wider world and the Foreign Office offered me a chance to join them when I was serving in Hong Kong. I remained a diplomat until 1976 but one day in 1974, and I promise you this is true, I was at home in Somerset from Geneva when I was canvassed by a Liberal in a woolly hat and anorak. It was during one of the elections. I think I was pretty grumpy with him but he persisted and I invited

him to come in (something canvassers should never do!). An hour later he had persuaded me that I was a Liberal. The next thing was that by 1976 I had decided to join the Liberal Party, leave the Foreign Office and try and stand for my home constituency of Yeovil. Everyone thought I was mad. At that time Yeovil was 78<sup>th</sup> on the Liberals' winnable seat list, but I did it.'

Sadly we shall never know who recruited the future MP and party leader. Ashdown cannot remember his name and has never seen him since.

His diplomatic time in Geneva had been with the British mission. He was co-opted on to then Foreign Minister Jim Callaghan's team at the Cyprus peace conference in 1975 where he first met the minister's assistant, Tom McNally, later to be one of his closest advisers in the Liberal Democrats. At that time McNally tried to persuade him not to join the Liberals, but he left the FO and took on the candidacy of Yeovil at what was, thanks to its internal and well-documented difficulties, one of the lowest points in the Liberal Party's history.

His conversion to Liberalism had been exactly as he had described. He admitted to no previous Liberal heroes ('I don't believe in heroes'), not much previous knowledge of the Liberal Party and none of the works of John Stuart Mill. Surprisingly he does attribute some of his dormant Liberalism to his time as a leader in the Special Boat Squadron. 'I was commanding people who were just as good as me. It was a pure accident of birth that put me in charge and that made me think a lot about the need for a classless society in which every individual has the same rights.' In 1976 he took the plunge.

'I think the party stood at 8 or cent in the polls,' he says. 'Nevertheless I presumed that as I was such a wonderful person I only had to descend on the constituency and eat a strawberry cream tea or two and the seat would be

mine. I was wrong. It took me eight years and two periods of unemployment to win Yeovil.'

That was also the time of Ashdown the youth worker, with his patient wife Jane and two young children, Kate and Simon, to support. When he was eventually, and proudly, elected it was 1983, at the height of the Liberal/SDP Alliance. Had he seen the Alliance at that time as workable or a confusion?

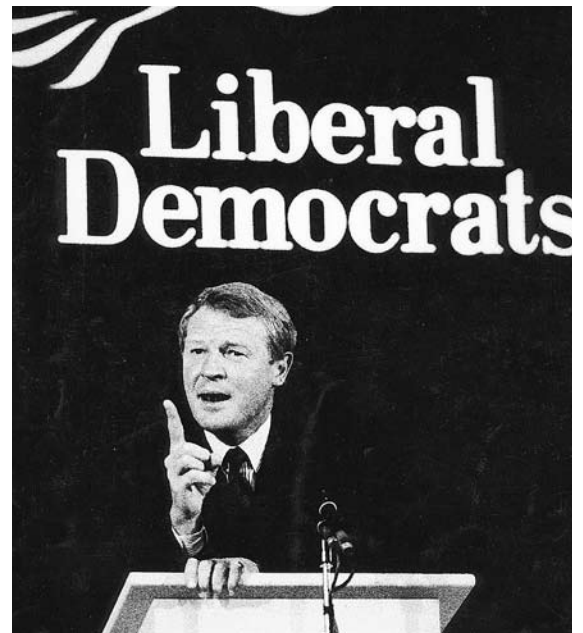
'Oh, a confusion. I remember saying that I didn't see why we should be selling our birth-right for this mess of pottage. I was wrong by the way, but in '83 Roy Jenkins was a terrible drag on our ability to win votes, and I regarded the SDP as a means of weakening our radicalism. I was very wary of them.'

In those days he had a reputation as a party rebel, particularly on defence, but he claims not to have seen himself that way, even if he admits to playing to the rebel gallery occasionally in order to get himself noticed. 'I remember over-hearing [Lord] Gruff Evans describing me as "Bloody Ashdown. He's like a bounding young boy scout".' Or a 'Tigger', as others described him then and later.

By 1987 his view of the SDP had mellowed and he was one of the first to express his support for merger of the two parties. 'Over those four years I came to the view that the SDP actually added to us things that we did not have, like a certain intellectual rigour, lost by being in opposition for too long; the importance of modernity and being able to communicate your message in a professional and sharp-edged way; and, lastly, the recognition, as I have always believed, that a strain of Liberalism is economic liberalism, not to dominate social liberalism but to be brought together with it.'

Would he call himself an economic liberal?

'Well, Alan Beith and I deliberately did everything we could after the merger to bring the merged party on to the economic



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liberal ground. So, yes, I would but I do not accept that there has to be a dichotomy between the two. By liberalising the marketplace you can help to solve poverty by giving everyone the opportunity to generate their own wealth, while at the same time assisting those at the bottom of the pile.'

He smiled the faraway Ashdown smile when I suggested that he might not have expected both David Steel and David Owen to opt out of standing as leader of the party. 'Oh, I don't know. I was an ambitious man and I was watching. Mind you, I think Owen was a fool to opt out. He could have been leader. It was all about his personal vanity.'

The merged party Ashdown inherited turned out to be economically verging on bankruptcy and politically holed by David Owen's suicidal decision to try and go it alone in competition. After the heady days of the early '80s the best the merged party and the rump SDP could muster between them was less than 10 per cent in the polls. The nadir for both of them came in 1989, when the Greens won 15 per cent in the Euro-elections and beat them both. That signalled the death knell for the rump SDP and near financial collapse for the then named Social & Liberal Democrats.

'It was the worst point of my leadership,' says Ashdown, 'and, if you remember, the economic crisis meant that most of us in charge were in danger of being personally liable.' Luckily for all, the financial measures taken and the disappearance of Owen signalled an about-turn in party fortunes. Ashdown was able to think more about defining what the new party was about. How did he see Liberal Democracy at that time?

'First of all, to have been the founding leader of the party was my greatest pride, but you're right – we had to give it its shape, give its quality, structure and organisation, its badge, its bird, its colours and a better name. And my perception then was very clear. The

Tories were going to become discredited and Labour under Kinnock and John Smith was not going to be able to make the change necessary to fill the space. So I saw us as positioning ourselves almost where we are now, in the centre-left position.'

He confesses to being disappointed by the party's results in the 1992 general election and blames himself and his campaign chief Des Wilson for putting too much emphasis in the last two weeks on holding the balance of power. 'We would never actually have gone into coalition with the discredited Tories but it put us centre stage. Unfortunately people also took another look at Kinnock's Labour and his disastrous Sheffield rally and decided that we might let him in by the back door, and they didn't want that. In retrospect it was probably better for us. We would never have got the result we did in 1997 if we had just been in coalition government with Kinnock's Labour.'

Tony Blair was a very different matter. It is obvious that Ashdown struck a good political relationship with him at a very early stage and, despite disappointments, he persisted with that relationship long after many others would have put an end to it. He sees the big pluses for the party that came out of it as the agreement to a form of PR and devolved government for Scotland and Wales, as argued for in the pre-election joint constitutional discussions with Labour; the introduction of PR for the European elections; and the fact that the Liberal Democrats more than doubled the number of their seats at the 1997 election.

'Not a bad achievement for a third party when the government has an overall majority of 179,' he says, but he had also wanted PR for Westminster and that never happened. 'And the overall aim I had also set myself was bigger than just electoral reform. I wanted to realign British politics.' He and Blair might well have gone further down that road if they had not both been taken by surprise

by the size of the Labour majority. Ashdown was looking for cabinet seats for Liberal Democrats to go with the promise of PR for Westminster, and he believed Blair wanted to deliver – but, even if he had, would Ashdown have persuaded his party that coalition was the right thing to do?

'I don't know, but the point about leaders is that they have to lead and do things. I think if I had turned up with Labour's agreement on the Jenkins Report on PR and the opportunity to go into government with two or three positions I believe I would have got the party's support. But Jack Straw killed the Jenkins Report and without it I would never have agreed to any form of coalition. I had already made it clear to Blair that I would never agree to any amalgamation of our two parties.'

Charles Kennedy is usually credited with having put an end to the relationship with Blair's government. Paddy Ashdown describes the Kennedy process as 'understandably letting it wither on the vine.'

'With the benefit of hindsight' he says, 'it is obvious now that until about November 1997 all of the things we wanted were possible but that beyond that Blair's power was already diminishing. Then came Jack Straw's performance on *Newsnight* over Jenkins. If I had remained as leader beyond 1999, I would have killed the whole relationship sooner rather than later.'

As we moved towards a close, and with Charles Kennedy still in mind, I felt that I had to ask Paddy Ashdown whether, if he had still been leader, he would have supported the government over Iraq. His answer was the most measured of this interview. I relay it as fully as space allows.

'I say this now because Charles has gone. Yes, I would have done. I am very clear that it was necessary to do. I could not have predicted that they would make such a mess of the peace, but I was very clear that something needed to be done at that

**If I had remained as leader beyond 1999, I would have killed the whole relationship with Labour sooner rather than later.'**

particular point, and I think history may well agree with that. I realise that if I had recommended that course to the party as leader they might have rejected it, and me with it, but you have to do what you believe to be right. My reasons were very simple.'

'It didn't matter how we had got ourselves into this situation. In the end it was a confrontation between an extremely evil man, Saddam Hussein, and the United States, and to allow the United States to be defeated in this would have been devastating for western power. We remain dependent, whether we like it or not, on the United States to help us to establish a broadly liberal world, even if I would not necessarily ascribe that aim to the current administration.'

'Secondly, the consequences for the Middle East of a triumph for Hussein would have been catastrophic, not least in Iran. And, by the way, I don't resile from that position today, although I grant that the situation has been nuanced by the disastrous way in which they have dealt with the peace. But one of my other calculations was not whether Saddam had weapons of mass destruction or not. In a sense, that did not matter. What was important was to show we were serious about doing something about WMDs. I am very confident that without doing so we would not have been able to bring, for example, Libya back into the fold. Nor could we have stood up to the threats in North Korea and Iran, if we had not shown we were serious about them. The world would have been a more dangerous place.'

'If the Middle East and the Arab world is to turn towards democracy, its chances of doing so are greater today than they were. The extremist Islamic movement has no sustainable message that can win. In the end, that must be defeated by the forces of democracy and liberalism. I believe the fact that we have attempted to put democracy into place in Iraq, albeit rather cack-handedly,

may hopefully be seen by history as the determining moment at which the democratic processes and liberal values of the state can come elsewhere. It may not look like it at the moment but we are still too close to make absolute judgments.'

'Yes. It was a tough decision but at the time I would have gone along with it and even today I don't think to say it was the wrong decision.'

Listening to that answer, it had become obvious that under Paddy Ashdown the last few years would have been very different for the Liberal Democrats. In conclusion, I moved hastily on from the might-have-been to the present. He had, of course, voted successfully for Menzies Campbell as leader and I knew that he would not be drawn into giving him advice through me, but I wanted to know how he viewed the effectiveness of the challenge from a Labour Party under Gordon Brown and a Tory party under David Cameron.

'I remember once saying in a conference speech – not a bad line actually – that the day there is a change in Downing St from Blair to Brown it would be a change overnight from Camelot to Gormenghast. We would see the spectral figure of this dour Prime Minister flitting down Downing Street after the midnight hour, counting the stamps of his ministers. But now it may be different. There may be a certain cathartic release from a Prime Minister who is seen to be all about spin to someone who perhaps is of more substance, and that could easily mean a lift in the polls for Brown.'

'As for Cameron, I don't think we should underestimate what he is doing. He is doing the things that are necessary. Why do the Lib Dems keep on winning seats? Because the Tory party is the nasty party and respectable people don't like to admit being Tories. That's changing. I think he is reasserting the old liberal-Conservative (if that is the word) tradition so I think it

**'[The invasion of Iraq] was a tough decision but at the time I would have gone along with it and even today I don't think to say it was the wrong decision.'**

will be quite appealing. But the significant thing about him and Brown is that they are both, in a flawed and fractured way, trying to get on to our ground because theirs is so untenable. So there is a danger of the middle ground becoming quite crowded. There is only one answer. We just have to be better, more convincing and sharper than they are about putting forward the policies of the Liberal position. But they both, particularly Cameron, have a problem with credibility and there is plenty of opportunity there for us.'

You get the feeling that, for all his protestations that he does not want another political job because he has had a wonderful and busy career and now wants to take life a little easier, inside Paddy Ashdown there is still a restless politician packed full of energy and trying to get out and be useful. On the day of our interview he denied vigorously a *Guardian* report that he was going to become a roving foreign affairs 'ambassador' for Menzies Campbell and the Liberal Democrats. 'It's *Guardian* nonsense. I was never offered such a job,' he says.

Time will tell whether other jobs will tempt him. Meanwhile I doubt that he will be spending a lot of time in the tea room of the House of Lords and I suspect that, if you are looking for a view on any major issue, this endlessly energetic, national, and now international, figure will be very happy to give you one.

*Adrian Slade was the last President of the Liberal Party from 1987 to 1988 and, with Shirley Williams, Joint Interim President of the Social & Liberal Democrats after the Liberal merger with the SDP, from March until July 1988, when Paddy Ashdown and Ian Wrigglesworth were elected as the party's first Leader and President respectively.*

*A shortened version of this interview will appear in Liberal Democrat News in May 2006.*