

OLD HEROES FOR

As we have done in each of the last two Liberal Democrat leadership elections, in 1999 and 2006, in November the Liberal Democrat History Group asked both candidates for the Liberal Democrat leadership to write a short article on their favourite historical figure or figures – the ones they felt had influenced their own political beliefs most, and why they had proved important and relevant. Their replies were posted on our website during the leadership election, and are reproduced below. Their heroes? Vaclav Havel, David Lloyd George and Harry Willcock.

What Havel and Willcock share is a willingness to take a personal stand on issues of freedom and liberty.

Nick Clegg MP – *Harry Willcock; Vaclav Havel*

IN RECENT weeks I've made it clear that I'd be prepared to go to court rather than be forced to give personal information about myself to a compulsory Identity Cards database. So it's probably no surprise that the first of my liberal heroes is a North London dry cleaner, Harry Willcock.

When stopped by police in 1950 and asked for his ID card he refused, with the now famous words: 'I am a Liberal. I am against that sort of thing.'

Harry was an active Liberal, having been a councillor and parliamentary candidate. Thanks to his stand, which was supported by Liberal MPs and Lords at the time, the ID cards programme was first challenged in the courts and then finally scrapped. He showed that one man willing to take a stand can change the system.

The liberal argument put forward by Harry and others in opposition was a fundamental one; it was an argument about liberty and the relationship between the individual and the state. For them, the imposition of ID cards was intolerable because of the power it gave to the state, a power which was inevitably abused.

I was moved recently to see the plaque in the National Liberal Club in Harry's honour. He died while participating in a

debate at the Club, and it is said that 'freedom' was the last word to pass his lips.

The arguments of Willcock and the liberals of his day remain relevant. The Liberal Democrats continue to stand against an over-bearing state and are willing to take a stand for what we believe.

My second hero is Vaclav Havel – a man who married high art and high politics. His leadership of the Charter 77 manifesto group and then the Velvet Revolution was an inspiration to people of my generation who witnessed and admired his courage, and that of other freedom fighters behind the Iron Curtain such as Lech Walesa. He showed that men of principle and character truly can change the world.

Havel spent many years in prison and even when released was kept under surveillance and constantly harassed. Yet his determination to change the government of his country for the better did not falter. He put at the cornerstone of his activities a belief in the importance of non-violent resistance. Few politicians can ever hope to move people in the number of ways that Havel did with his words and deeds.

He is also a particular hero of mine because many years ago I met him in his presidential

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palace in Prague. At the time I was working on the Czech Republic's application to join the European Union and he gave a small group of us a considerable amount of time. He is a small, quiet man, with a compelling intensity about him.

Chris Huhne MP – *David Lloyd George*

MY HERO is David Lloyd George. An outsider, with none of the benefits of inherited wealth or education, he became one of the most dynamic and brilliant politicians ever to lead the Liberal Party.

He was a radical to his bones. His early prominence came partly through his campaign against the Boer War. He helped to build an anti-war coalition including not merely the advanced elements of the party, outraged by imperial aggression, but also some of the most conservative and rural elements, who identified with the independent qualities of the Boers.

In government, Lloyd George had a passionate belief in his own ability to cajole and persuade, amply demonstrated during labour disputes as President of the Board of Trade. He was a great speaker, but also a great listener. The two are connected: great speakers have to

What Havel and Willcock share is a willingness to take a personal stand on issues of freedom and liberty. It is, quite simply, the essence of liberalism – and that is why they are my political heroes.

be ever-sensitive to the moods and motivations of their audiences. As Chancellor of the Exchequer, he was the kingpin of the government's attempt to force through social welfare and overcome the opposition of the House of Lords.

The old age pension is his most durable domestic achievement, and a testament to his New Liberal thinking. The roots of this tradition are the wellspring of Liberal Democrat thinking today, whether coming through the New Liberal – or 'social liberal' – tradition or the social democratic tradition that rejoined us in 1981.

I also find Lloyd George's style as a politician appealing. He was an optimist who believed in the power of ideas to persuade and change the world, and he was always prepared to throw himself into the political battle even when the odds looked stacked against him. He was an anti-

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metropolitan politician: a believer that the best and purest instincts were to be found in the misty valleys of his beloved Wales, from which he drew emotional strength. Combined with this optimism was a great sense of mischief, captured for me in the marvellous Low cartoon, a copy of which I have on my study wall. Lloyd George is sitting, elfin-like, on the green benches, hugging himself with mirth; never pompous, always able to see the folly and the ridiculousness of power and position.

In the 1930s, he was the only mainstream politician who understood John Maynard Keynes's analysis of the causes of mass unemployment and the only statesman with the vision to banish it. It is the country's loss that he was never given the chance to do so.

Lloyd George remains a figure of controversy, but he had a real and lasting impact, both on the country and on the party. He has the strongest claim to be the father of the British welfare state and he was a great war leader at a time of desperate national need. He brought Liberalism into the twentieth century, adjusting successfully to the new politics of a mass industrial democracy and ensuring that it stood for radical social and economic reform. He has been dead for sixty years – but his record should inspire us all.