

Old heroes for

AS WE HAVE in each of the Liberal Democrat leadership elections other than the first, in 1988 (which took place before the History Group had been formed), in July the Liberal Democrat History Group asked the two candidates for the Liberal Democrat leadership to write a short article on their favourite historical figure or figures – those that they felt had influenced their own political beliefs most, and why they had proved important and relevant. We placed no restrictions on their choices: they could choose anyone they wanted, whether a Liberal or not, and they were free to choose more than one if they liked.

At the end of their two articles, we include a list of all previous leadership contenders' historical heroes.

Ed Davey – Paddy Ashdown

Liberals are not meant to have heroes, but I can't help it. I don't genuflect before grand or celebrity figures, but re-reading speeches or learning of the noble deeds of Liberals can move me the way opera or acts of military valour can have others dabbing a misty eye.

I love Gladstone for his insistence that: 'the sanctity of life in the hill villages of Afghanistan among the winter snows is as inviolable in the eye of Almighty God as can be your own'.

Or Asquith for, in the midst of unimaginable wartime stress, ignoring press opprobrium to visit German prisoners of war to demand their good treatment.

That instinctive determination to defend the vulnerable is what, I believe, makes us Liberals.



a new leader

Hard choice though this is, my Liberal hero is more recent: Paddy Ashdown, for whom I still grieve.

As a new member of staff in 1989, what surprised me was how wonderfully Paddy treated youngsters like me. He had a reputation for being brisk – even brusque – but I discovered that was a front. I perched, as the party’s chief economics adviser, in what felt like a tiny garget atop the old Whips’ Office. Here I would receive hand-written notes thanking me for a piece of work, and I’ve kept them all. Whether eating, chatting or indeed drinking with junior staff at conference, Paddy was like the dedicated officer with his troops. He inspired loyalty and hard work in equal measure.

Paddy’s stories only added to his mystique and magnetism. A young colleague was startled to find a note on his desk from Paddy one morning: ‘Call me on my car phone at 5.57am.’ It wasn’t so much the earliness as the preciseness of the hour that startled. Another note, upon Paddy assuming the party’s leadership, read simply: ‘Please remove David Steel’s dead animal from my office.’ It was a buffalo skin presented by Chief Buthelezi.

Sure, Paddy could be a task master, but even then I found him immense fun. Many a Monday morning my phone would bark into life: ‘Edward, come to my office now, please.’ From Paddy’s mouth ‘please’ became a command. Once before him I’d find he’d read some article over the weekend extolling a new economic policy that he wanted to adopt. And I’d spend a good thirty minutes dissuading him of some crazy, ill-thought-through fancy.

My biggest disagreement with him came after I’d been elected in 1997, when he was determined to cling on to his pre-election plan with Tony Blair for close working relations with Labour – despite that strategy having been devised for a balanced parliament, not for

a Labour majority of 167. Brilliant as he was, he couldn’t persuade parliamentary colleagues or the wider party that Lib-Labbery worked in this context, for it would have hitched us to policies we disagreed with without influence to change them.

Ironically, during the five days of coalition negotiations in 2010, it was Paddy and me who tried to convince Nick Clegg and co not to rule out coalition with Labour, despite the numbers being difficult to make work.

It was Paddy who first drew me to the party. All politicians have their causes, and for me it was the environment and education. Paddy made the green agenda a core strand of our identity when most MPs thought this a peripheral, even cranky, cause. I was hooked, and would like to think that my recently announced plan to decarbonise capitalism is one Paddy would have embraced with vim and verve.

I’m an economist by training and so I appreciated deeply that Paddy was, fundamentally, so economically literate. He took over a party that had been a little corporatist in its thinking but Paddy reconnected the party to its liberal roots, asking what a policy meant for the individual. He emphasised Mill’s idea of the power of education to unlock human potential. Without Paddy I’m not sure we would have had such ground-breaking Lib Dem achievements in government as the pupil premium, a development of his policy of a penny on income tax to improve education.

Finally, though a Liberal to his core, he sought to bring others into the Liberal tent. I took inspiration from Paddy when I called for a national government to deliver a people’s vote. How he made the Liberal Democrats a big enough tent for MPs of other parties to join us should be our inspiration.

If elected leader, I will build on his legacy. Paddy, I miss you terribly.



Layla Moran – Shirley Williams and Richard Feynman

Being asked to pick just one of the huge number of people I have found inspirational is almost impossible. From Charles Kennedy to Marie Curie and, more recently, Greta Thunberg, there is a plethora of activists through the ages that have inspired movements, challenged the status quo and effected change and progress.

That said, I've whittled it down to two people who have most affected me and my work and personal life.

Shirley Williams is an outstanding role model. Once described as potentially the first female Prime Minister, she would have been a much better one than the women we actually had! A Labour MP for fifteen years and a minister for most of that, she was one of the Gang of Four who founded the Social Democratic Party in 1981 – a year before I was born. She was the first person elected to Parliament under the SDP label, in the Crosby by-election later that year.

She served as President of the SDP throughout its lifetime, and in 1987 was one of the foremost campaigners for merger with the Liberal Party to form the Liberal Democrats. Later, she led the party in the House of Lords.

Throughout her career she stood for social justice and liberal values. She persevered in an environment dominated by men. In an interview in 1975, she mentioned that: 'the great day will come where no one in television ever asks you about women in politics, and then we will really have got equality'. Although we still have some way to go, at least the 2019 election saw the highest number of woman MPs elected – and our own parliamentary party, for the first time ever, has a majority of women.

She was an internationalist to her core. Her greatest and most consistent political involvement was over Europe. In 1971 she was one of the sixty-nine Labour MPs who voted, against a three-line whip, for Britain to join the European Economic Community, and Labour's hostility to Europe – which we saw again under Corbyn – was one of the main reasons for the SDP break-away.

But it is her style as much as her beliefs that led me to nominate her as my hero. She is one of the very small number of politicians who ordinary voters addressed by her first name. She combined intellect with passion and personal warmth, and showed that all three can change minds. Of all the members of the Gang of Four, she was the one that Labour moderates who

stayed behind most missed, and the one who most attracted recruits to her new party.

My second inspirational hero is Richard Feynman, an American physicist whose lectures were one of the reasons I decided to study physics at university. He worked on quantum mechanics and particle physics; he pioneered the field of quantum computing and introduced the concept of nanotechnology. In 1965, along with two others, he won the Nobel Prize in Physics.

He wasn't overtly political, though he held liberal views, and very progressive ones at that. But he is not without controversy. He was often seen as a bit of a maverick in his approach and his humour could be cutting and sometimes offensive. He said some controversial things about women that I'd have enjoyed debating with him – though he also conceded that women do suffer discrimination and prejudice in physics, so I think I'd have won that debate. He also worked on the Manhattan Project – the development of the atomic bomb – during World War Two.

But his real inspiration to me was the way in which he viewed the world. He famously said: 'I am smart enough to know I am dumb'. His appetite for knowledge was driven by an insatiable curiosity. He was known for his creativity and humour, and his ability to explain complex problems in a way which anyone could understand.

I've taken learnings from Feynman's approach with me into my political career. In an age when everyone strives for absolute certainty, I try to challenge my own assumptions by seeking opposing views – which helps with both creativity and grounded decision-making. I'm not afraid to try new approaches and embrace change. And the art of taking a complex problem, explaining it and genuinely

Previous leadership candidates' heroes	
1999 (Journal of Liberal History 23)	
Jackie Ballard	David Penhaligon, Nancy Seear
Malcolm Bruce	David Lloyd George
Simon Hughes	David Lloyd George, Nelson Mandela
Charles Kennedy	Roy Jenkins
David Rendel	William Wilberforce, Nancy Seear
2006 (Journal of Liberal History 50)	
Menzies Campbell	Roy Jenkins, Jo Grimond
Simon Hughes	David Lloyd George, Nelson Mandela
Chris Huhne	David Lloyd George
2007 (Journal of Liberal History 57)	
Nick Clegg	Harry Willcock, Vaclav Havel
Chris Huhne	David Lloyd George
2015 (Journal of Liberal History 87)	
Tim Farron	William Beveridge, Simon Hughes
Norman Lamb	John Maynard Keynes
2017 (Journal of Liberal History 96)	
Vince Cable	Roy Jenkins
2019 (Journal of Liberal History 103)	
Ed Davey	Paddy Ashdown
Jo Swinson	Anita Roddick

engaging people in solving it, is as valuable to politics as it is to science.

Both of these inspiring people have shaped who I am today and my values. The boldness of Shirley Williams in standing up for what she believed, winning people over through both keen intellect and emotional intelligence, and the creative thinking and charisma of Richard Feynman: these qualities are missing from the party right now, but they are desperately needed for us to cut through the noise and win back voters. I believe that's what I can offer.

Think history

Can you spare some time to help the History Group?

The Liberal Democrat History Group undertakes a wide range of activities – publishing this *Journal* and our Liberal history books and booklets, organising regular speaker meetings, maintaining the Liberal history website and providing assistance with research.

We'd like to do more, but our activities are limited by the number of people involved in running the Group. We would be enormously grateful for help with any of the activities mentioned above, or anything else you've wanted us to do but we aren't! If you're interested in getting involved, contact the Editor, **Duncan Brack** (journal@liberalhistory.org.uk) – we would love to hear from you.

