

Old Heroes for a New Leader

Liberal Democrat leadership candidates describe their historical inspirations.

The Liberal Democrat History Group asked all the five candidates for the Liberal Democrat leadership to write a short article for the *Journal* on their favourite historical figure or figures – the ones they felt had influenced their own political beliefs most, and why they proved important and relevant. Their replies are printed below.

Jackie Ballard MP

I instinctively recoil from the idea of heroes, because inevitably, being human, they all have their flaws. For this reason, and because they would be horribly embarrassed, I'm not going to write about my two living political heroes – Conrad Russell and Shirley Williams.

The real heroes in life are the people who survive on low incomes, who bring up three children single-handedly, who challenge authority when no-one else believes in their cause, who juggle part-time jobs and childcare, look after elderly relatives or battle with multiple disabilities. They are the unknown and unsung heroes – the sort of people I look at with admiration as I chastise myself for ever complaining about my life.

David Penhaligon loved people and he loved challenges. He was the leader the Liberal Party

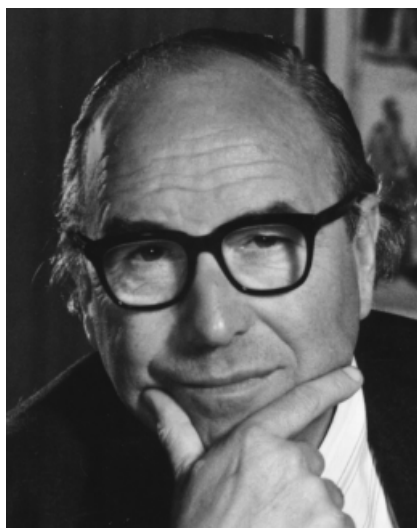


never had, and his death in 1986 robbed us of one of our most popular and effective campaigners. I never met him, but like all great communicators he had the knack of making everyone feel that they knew him. He fought injustice

wherever he found it, his humanity and warmth enabled him to communicate with people who claimed not to be interested in politics, and he never took his feet off the ground. As a young man he joined the Young Liberals, he campaigned from the grassroots up, fighting a no-hope Parliamentary seat himself and encouraging others to stand as Liberals in local elections.

He was committed to community politics and to the liberal approach to local government. Penhaligon wanted to shake the establishment and he wanted a different type of council – devoted to the underdog, not wedded to nineteenth-century ritual but open and accessible to the public. No campaigning workshop is complete without someone quoting Penhaligon's maxim: 'If you have something to say, stick it on a piece of paper and stuff it through the letterbox'. Perhaps one of his other attractions for me is that, in his wife's words, 'he gained the reputation of being distinctly difficult over pacts and alliances with Labour'.

Nancy Seear was an active campaigner for Liberalism for over fifty years. She would not have described herself as a feminist, but was one of our most powerful, indomitable and best-known female representatives, a role model for many women entering politics. In contrast to Penhaligon, Nancy was not a grassroots politician, but she was a talented and energetic speaker who used her ability to campaign for equal pay for women, for democracy in the workplace and many other causes dear to her. In *Why I Am a Liberal Democrat*, published a year before her death, Nancy said: 'I was in Germany when the Nazis made their first big electoral advance, and watched them centralise everything in sight, destroying pluralism. This left me with the unshakeable conviction that power must be spread as widely as possible.'



Roy Jenkins



David Lloyd George



Nelson Mandela

All heroes have their flaws, and hero-worship is misplaced in a Liberal. I didn't agree with everything David Penhaligon or Nancy Seear said or did – but that's how it should be. No-one, not even a hero, is perfect.

Malcolm Bruce MP

The political inspiration for my Liberalism has always been *David Lloyd George*. He came from a fairly modest background and started his career fighting to secure his home base in a tight situation, something with which I can closely identify. He was not afraid to support unpopular causes, like opposition to the Boer War, for which he required police protection.

Above all, he was an energetic campaigner for a radical agenda and, unlike Churchill, for example, combined the qualities of a great war leader with the inspiration that founded the welfare state.



His 'People's Budget' of 1909 is a watershed in British social history. I remember campaigning in a

by-election in Dundee as a student in the 1960s and, in a poor tenement area of the town, came across household after household in which the breadwinner described himself as being on the 'Lloyd George'.

Unlike today's Chancellors, Lloyd George steered his budget through all stages in the House of Commons, moving clauses and amendments long into the night. The Liberal Government also fought a general election over the budget and provoked probably the most important confrontation that has ever taken place between the Commons and the Lords. He established unemployment and sickness benefit, and the old age pension, which still form a key part of the social justice debate.

Yet he went on from that to take over leadership of the country in the darkest hours of the First World War and saw through the peace negotiations. His inability to fulfil his pledge to build 'homes fit for heroes' led to his eclipse, but that was because of divisions within his own party that left him a prisoner of the Conservatives. In spite of the 1922 setback he still managed to inspire the Liberal Yellow Book for the 1929 election, which reinvigorated the Liberal Party before its demise in the Depression and Second World War.

Lloyd George, for all his faults, was the epitome of a radical campaigning Liberal. His ideas were

practical, clear and coherent. His passion grew out of his commitment to his own background and his own community. He was compromised by a lack of personal wealth, which led him into dubious business ventures and accusations of selling titles. His energies led him into many compromising liaisons, which earned him the abusive nickname of the old goat. This doesn't make him a more attractive personality, but shows him as very human. In today's febrile era of tabloid intrusion he would almost certainly have been destroyed. British society would have been the poorer and the torch of Liberalism would have been dimmed.

I regard myself as a practical radical, always striving for ideas which are easily understood, will improve people's lives in measurable ways and are credible and achievable. For this Lloyd George was and remains my inspiration.

Simon Hughes MP

David Lloyd George

Lloyd George really did know my grandfather. I was first taken to Lloyd George's childhood home (and his final resting place) by the banks of the River Dwyfor by my grandfather before I was three. I have visited regularly ever since. Lloyd George has been an inspiration partly because he



David Penhaligon



Nancy Seear



William Wilberforce

had no privileged background and a difficult upbringing. In spite of the inevitable human weaknesses of all politicians, he was the central figure of one of the two greatest periods of radical change this country has known during the last hundred years.

Lloyd George's determination to set in place the beginning of our pension and social security system, his willingness to remain a radical when in office as well as when in opposition, his great 'People's Budget' of 1909, his commitment to constitutional reform and disestablishment and his abiding interest in international affairs are a combination of priorities to which I have always aspired.

In addition, the Welsh wizard had the ability to inspire ordinary



non-party political people, to engage them in the political process, to support radical politics and to get them to

respond to the liberal message. Making liberal democracy popular – even populist – is a cause we should champion again.

Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, President of South Africa 1994–99)

Just as Lloyd George was my hero from the first half of the century, so Nelson Mandela is my hero from the second. I am privileged to have met him.

When I first started campaigning against apartheid (with Peter Hain, among others), Nelson Mandela was one of the leaders of the struggle from behind bars.

When I first went to South Africa in 1986, I stood amongst the burned-out homes of the Crossroads squatter camp, encircled by South African Defence Force armoured cars, and sneaked into townships at night to see families whose members had been necklaced. Mandela was the liberation leader waiting in the wings.

When I spoke alongside Jesse Jackson to tens of thousands in Trafalgar Square at an anti-apartheid rally, Mandela was the inspiration for the international solidarity and struggle. When Mandela walked free from his prison cell, he was the symbol of the triumph of good over evil, and of perseverance over adversity.

When the first South African democratic elections took place, Mandela was the leader who rose above party politics. When he was President of South Africa he was the living embodiment of the qualities

of forgiveness, generosity and statesmanship.

Mandela is the radical pluralist, an enlightened, principled sort of leader who is an inspiration for millions. He is an object lesson, not just for this century but for the next.

Charles Kennedy

It is sometimes difficult to pick one historical hero, when there are so many on offer to Liberal Democrats. I am sure we have all been influenced by the thinking of people such as Mill and Keynes, and they certainly loom large in my own personal hall of fame.

But for a more personal choice, I am opting for someone who has had a deep impact on my involvement in politics, and a profound effect on the shape of our party. I have also had the privilege to know and work with him for nearly twenty years: *Roy Jenkins*.

There is much that I could say about Roy, as a minister, an important figure in European politics, a gifted author, and latterly, an



elder statesman. But here, I would like to focus on his importance to me as a political mentor and personal inspiration.

The late 1970s were difficult times for anyone with an instinctively progressive outlook and a strong belief in social justice. I was hostile to the Conservative Party of the time, which was steadily losing its 'one nation' credentials, and drifting further to the right, guided by Thatcher and Joseph. Yet at the same time, the Labour Party was becoming more and more narrow-minded, inward-looking and extreme.

Out of this unhappy state of affairs came Roy Jenkins' famous 1979 Dimpleby Lecture, 'Home Thoughts from Abroad'. Every so often in life, you hear someone articulate your own thoughts – and they do so with an elegance and eloquence which make you wish you had been able to say it yourself. As an open-minded, pro-European, moderate-thinking Scot, Roy Jenkins' Dimpleby Lecture had that effect on me. He brought sharply into focus the unease I felt about the choices that Labour and the Conservatives were offering the British people.

Roy offered a vision of the type of political party I wanted to join. He spoke of the need for a party of the radical centre to bring about constitutional and electoral reform at the heart of our political life, to end the failures of the two-party system. The new political system that resulted would allow parties to cooperate where they shared ideas. The new party that Jenkins saw leading these changes would also devolve power, while advancing new policy agendas for women, the third world, and the environment. He spoke too of the need to combine 'the innovating stimulus of the free market economy' without the 'brutality of its untrammelled distribution of rewards or its indifference to unemployment'.

For me, the Dimpleby Lecture was a rallying cry for those who wished politics to move beyond the class war that it had become, and it struck many chords. It was a vision

of a radical, decentralist, and internationalist party, combining the best of the progressive Liberal and social democratic traditions. It was a vision of the party that we have become. From the first, I was clear that I wanted to be part of this new force in British politics.

David Rendel MP

There are two historical figures who stand out in my own political development. Both were notable for their dogged pursuit of liberal values.

One, *William Wilberforce*, turned a cause into a campaign and the campaign into a historic victory, the abolition of the slave trade.

The other, *Nancy Seear*, stands out precisely because she persisted despite much less obvious success. Persistence in a just cause in the face of likely defeat can be even more impressive than persistence when in view of probable victory.

Today, there are many people living in poverty and many more with few choices in life, but slavery as it existed less than two centuries ago has been wiped from the planet. Much of the credit for this belongs to the Yorkshire MP William Wilberforce, who led the abolition campaign.

The campaign spanned five decades and there were many setbacks, not least because of the powerful vested interests defending slavery. However, in 1807 Parliament agreed to enforce fines on anyone found engaging in the trade. But ending the trade in Britain was only ever Wilberforce's initial objective. Once that was achieved, he turned to the international trade and to the principle that one person could legitimately own another. Despite failing health, he lived to see slavery finally abolished in 1833, two days before his death.

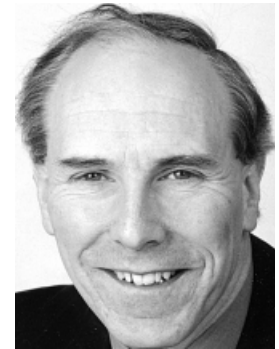
Wilberforce was not, however, a one-issue politician. His major concern was to inject the process of government with ethics. For Wilberforce the code was Christian. Today I am sure it would be liberal and demo-

cratic. Like most politicians, though, it is wise to be aware of the faults. I do not subscribe to all of Wilberforce's views. He backed legislation after the Peterloo massacre which would make Jack Straw feel uneasy; and his support for the Corn Laws undoubtedly kept many people in poverty. But Wilberforce's battle against slavery is a model for us all: the persistent pursuit of an unquestionable cause against fiercely vested interests to eventual success.

Nancy Seear's influence on my politics is rather more direct. I looked up to her for many years. I campaigned with her. Like many Liberal Democrats, I still feel her loss.

Nancy was, above all, a great liberal. Someone who regarded the state with the suspicion it deserves. Someone whose

prime focus was helping people to achieve their full potential, to lead their own path in life as they would



wish to. But Nancy coupled her intellect with an undying self-belief and a practical determination to see liberalism in action. She worked tirelessly in election campaigns and in the House of Lords. Long after she had first become a hero of mine I had the pleasure of working alongside her. She was and is an inspiration

There are frequent dark moments in politics, especially for the third party. It is at these times that we need people like Nancy Seear and William Wilberforce. People whose belief in their cause is such that they are undaunted by the scale of their task. People who see a set-back as just another hurdle to overcome. There is no doubt that we will have many hurdles on our path to government. But we must go on walking that path. We owe it to those who have given so much to get us this far.