

Shirley Williams was one of Britain's best-known female politicians in the 1970s and '80s. She helped found the SDP and then the Liberal Democrats. **Elizabeth Evans** interviewed her for the *Journal of Liberal History*.



BALANCING FAMILY AND POLITICS

'BECAUSE THE women's revolution and the self-confidence among women that it engendered are of relatively recent date, the highest positions of leadership in the professions and public life are still largely held by men. Given the double responsibilities that women with families bear, it is likely to remain so until there is a much more radical redistribution of family responsibilities between the sexes.¹

Shirley Williams has for many decades offered a substantial input to British politics. As a Labour minister and founder member of the SDP and Liberal Democrats, and for many years subsequently, she has made a remarkable, positive contribution to political debate. Many

politicians of all parties and numerous academics have been both inspired by and indebted to her.

Shirley Williams was born in 1930 in London, daughter of political scientist Sir George Catlin and novelist Vera Brittain. She read PPE at Somerville College, Oxford and went to Columbia University, New York, as a Fulbright Scholar. After working as a journalist between 1960 and 1964 she was elected Labour MP for Hitchin in 1964 and served in the Labour government under Prime Minister Harold Wilson. During her time in the Labour Party she held several senior Cabinet roles until the 1979 election, in which she lost her seat.

Concerned at the growing influence of the far left, Shirley Williams left the Labour Party and was one of the Gang of Four who founded the Social Democratic Party in 1981. In November of that year she became the first SDP member to be elected to Parliament, winning the Crosby by-election. She served as President of the SDP from 1982 until 1988, when, with her support, the party merged with the Liberals. Her publications include *Politics is for People* (1981) and *God and Caesar* (2003).² Shirley Williams re-entered Parliament as a life peer in 1993, and in 2001 was elected Leader of the Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords, a position which she held until September 2004.

Did you have any role models when you first started out in politics?

Yes, Edith Summerskill was very impressive, a very striking and handsome-looking lady, very tailored, she was a friend of my parents. Another one was Eleanor Rathbone, who brought in family allowances, my mother knew her well. One of my role models was Herbert Morrison; he adopted me and was my mentor, he spent a lot of time talking to me about politics.

People frequently identify you as a role model, how do you respond to that?

They're all very sweet, but I'm not overcome with conceit – there weren't very many of my generation! Barbara Castle wasn't really a role model, she was very far left and anti-Europe but she was always very nice and supportive of me.

Did you consider the women MPs to be particularly supportive of each other?

Partly because of women's lib in the 1960s, people accepted that women could be friends. Now this would seem strange to people today but in the generation above mine, certainly in my mother's generation, there was a feeling that women couldn't be friends. They spent their whole life fighting each other for a man, partly because of the war and the fact there were fewer men around, and that fed into that image of women as competitors. Almost all the old film plots were about women fighting for a man, an evil scheming woman and a Doris Day character, and eventually the good girl wins but the fundamental assumption of this was that women couldn't be friends.

My mother was furious about this and wrote a book about it.³ It's changed tremendously now, though.

What one piece of advice would you give to a woman starting out in politics?

Young women need to surround themselves with a group of very frank friends who they can test out ideas on, give speeches to and test out questions on. They should be committed to that person and not just rivals.

How did you manage to combine campaigning with raising a family?

I was able to be a politician despite having a small child because I bought a big house with friends and between us we raised the kids together. That meant that one person was always there in the house when school got out and that person, whoever that was, looked after all the children. If one had a scratch then there was someone to look after them. Now you can imagine candidates, maybe two or three, sharing a house? It made all the difference in the world: our kids were secure, they knew they had a mother and a father, and they played with one another. There was always someone there, they weren't latchkey kids. It works well if you have friends who you get on well with to share a house.

One of the things we could do in the Liberal Democrats would be to look at some areas and suggest that people share houses. We're all so nuclear, which doesn't help. But it really makes a hell of a lot of difference if you're in a neighbourhood, like I was [as a child] in Newcastle [under Lyme], where everyone in the terraces looked after the kids – they all played in the alleyways. We need to look at the ways in which we're going to build new houses; if people are willing to share, you get a lot more people into houses. It would have to be as part of a change in the social culture, because this is a very private country.

You have to have a team of people supporting you, not just a team who will go out canvassing or leafleting.

Campaigning for any election is hard work. Can you envisage a situation whereby flexi-campaigning would be possible to help women with caring responsibilities?

It's very hard. When I moved a motion for a certain amount of positive discrimination in favour of women, it was in recognition that having children makes all the difference in the world. Those that campaigned against it had a completely unrealistic view of what life was going to be like. So as we couldn't have all-women shortlists we need to think of other strategies.

You have to have a team of people supporting you, not just a team who will go out canvassing or leafleting. If you're a man or a woman standing, you've got to have two or three older members of the party who are willing to help with childcare – it's so expensive that you can't afford it unless you're very rich. You need someone close to you round the clock really. There isn't any easy answer. We do already have crèches at conference but you need to extend that to cover women standing as candidates. If a child is very small then they're not so hard to farm out, but it gets harder when they get older. To cost in an older relative can be an important part of the answer.

*In your book *God and Caesar* you wrote that you thought that the concept of common humanity had been lost due to the focus on gender. Can you elaborate on that?*

By common humanity I mean that you sometimes get women's lib groups which are anti-men and can really be quite antipathetic towards men. Common humanity really is the notion that 90 per cent of our chromosomes are common. You mustn't forget the common humanity, the things we share, it's a large part of the whole, and I think that is sometimes lost sight of.

Can you give me an example to illustrate that?

I think one of the groups that has suffered from the advancement of women's liberation is children, because as women rightly claim their place in the public or professional scene men have not adapted their lifestyles to take on more caring responsibilities, although it is a slow process. The people in the family who suffer most are the very young and very old, and the people in the middle are struggling for the energy to find time to look after everyone. Not finding enough, they then cut back on their responsibility for the young or the old, leaving them stressed and miserable. We've got to change the expectations of boys to take in their roles as fathers and carers too, really, under which to be a man is in part recognising you have caring responsibilities in the way that women are brought up to believe. That's what has to change, otherwise you end up where we are now, where people are very stressed out and neglect each other, so there is always a struggle between man and woman over who is responsible for caring. In the case of women, because they have changed they resentfully pick up the responsibilities, but often with a very strong sense of injustice – 'why has it always got to be me?' Particularly for women who have full-time jobs – it's sometimes impossible to carry the strain.

So really it's a wider societal change that needs to take place?

Yes, that's right. That societal change has to be in two ways. One which has already happened is the move towards flexible working which the government has already undertaken, and I applaud the way it is getting employers to recognise the benefits and necessity of flexible working. The civil service is actually a very good employer, but commercial law

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firms, for example, get a young woman to be there from 8am to 6pm or 10am to 9pm, with no recognition of outside responsibilities – I'm talking here all the time about the responsibilities of both genders. You have this culture of long hours under which you judge someone as to whether they are going to be successful or not. You are in fact a company which is family-destructive. I've known a lot of very promising young people who couldn't manage, so they opted out and decided that law wasn't for them. The civil service, by contrast, does allow its lawyers to work from home and to have flexible hours. I think the government is pushing a bit too far towards forcing everybody back to work as early as possible. I would prefer to see them opting for part-time work for husband and wife, or ideally both, so that when children are very small one parent is there most of the time. Ideally it should be shared between them. Flexible working for men as well is crucial – look at Scandinavia where they have flexible working for men and women and a recognition that both parents are important to the upbringing of the child.

The second big societal change is to teach children at school about parenthood, certainly in secondary schools. What we have is lessons about sex, but nothing about the consequences of sex – which is a bit silly. Parental responsibilities should be emphasised as part of the conversation about sex. That should include, for example, children having some time in the school year where they spend time looking after children. In a lot of cases you could get fifth formers to help inter-school for two hours per week so they get to know how demanding young children are. Children take up a colossal amount of time, and grasping that would be a key part of accepting the key roles

they would have to play. If you don't understand the needs of young children then you don't understand the impact they will have. Some children come from larger families, which helps them understand, but others have very little experience of helping with younger children.

Would you consider yourself to be a feminist?

I suppose the answer is ... Well, actually, it depends what it means. I suppose I'm an equalist. I'm very keen that women should have the same opportunities as men, but because I don't see it as women getting more and more powerful, the way forward has to be for men to be family animals and not just career animals. Women are both already, but that shift will help women. Take an example, [as Secretary of State for Education] I tried to bring parenting classes in to schools. This was thought by Conservatives to be officious and to reduce boys to wimps. If you wish to be a parent you have to take substantial responsibility – whether you're male or female you can't just opt out. We recently heard in the first reading of the Embryology Bill that 800,000 children have no identified father. That's a tragedy because however hard you work, as a single woman it's too much to ask you to do, and you see the effects on these kids with no roots and no sense of identity. I think a male parent is critical for the well-being of children

Elizabeth Evans is the Guest Editor of this special edition of the Journal of Liberal History.

- 1 Shirley Williams, *God and Caesar* (London: Continuum, 2003), p. 61.
- 2 Shirley Williams, *Politics is for the People* (Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd, 1981).
- 3 Vera Brittain, *Testament of Friendship* (London, Virago Press Ltd, 1992).