



Liberal Democrat History Group

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What Influences Liberal Democrats?

John Stuart Mill, Jo Grimond, green economists and the Suez crisis, according to this Liberal Democrat History Group survey of formative influences on leading Liberal Democrat politicians; by Duncan Brack

In 1906 the Liberal journalist WT Stead wrote to the newly elected Labour MPs to discover the influence of books and religious affiliations on their political beliefs. His findings, that the Bible ranked second behind the works of Ruskin, while only two of the 45 who replied had read Marx, was the basis of the frequently repeated aphorism that the Labour Party owed more to Methodism than to Marx.

In 1962, 1975 and 1994 *New Society/New Statesman & Society* repeated the exercise with both Labour and Conservative MPs, widening the questions to include, last year, the influence of other forms of art or entertainment and of contemporary figures and events; one question covered the influence of intellectuals on the MP's party. The Labour response showed a decline in the influence of the classic intellectuals of the left and a resurgence of interest in the older forms of ethical socialism (and in the Bible). Conservatives revealed a lower level of interest in books and authors and a tendency to cite influences from within their own ranks and domestic experiences.

Liberal Democrat MPs were included in the survey, but too few responded to make an analysis worthwhile - hardly surprising, out of a total of only 23. Therefore, with permission from the NSS, the Liberal Democrat History Group repeated the survey in June and July this year, widening the sample to include Liberal Democrat MEPs, peers and members of the Federal Executive and Federal Policy Committee, the Party's top two decision-making bodies. This gave a total sample size of 117, of whom 47 responded (40%, compared to 31% and 24% amongst Labour and Conservatives; 11 MPs and MEPs

(44% response rate), 17 peers (34%) and 19 committee members (45%). The age range was probably rather wider than those of the MP-based samples in the other two parties. (Compared to the Liberal Democrat *membership* as a whole, women were under-represented and former Liberals (who dominate the Parliamentary Parties) over-represented; the regional and age spreads were probably about right.)

Books, Journals and Authors

Liberal Democrats are almost as likely as Labour MPs, and more so than Conservatives, to derive political influences from books or authors. But their selection is strikingly different. Over a third of all respondents mentioned the greatest of the Victorian Liberal philosophers, John Stuart Mill, usually for his essay *On Liberty*. This is a far higher proportion for a single author than any listed by Conservative or Labour MPs.

Also in this edition of the Newsletter:

Andrew Adonis:

Gladstone, Marx and Modern Progressives

Book Reviews:

Joyce: Giving Politics a Good Name

Hutton: The State We're In

Policy retrospective:

Education - Back to our Roots

Glasgow Conference fringe meeting:

Does New Labour Leave Room for New Liberals?

Has the reading of books played a significant part in influencing your political beliefs and actions?

	Lib Dem	Labour	Cons
Yes	83%	86%	67%

Which books or authors have had the greatest influence on your political beliefs?

Liberal Democrat		Labour		Conservative	
Mill	34%	Tressell	20%	Disraeli	16%
The Bible	13%	Tawney	13%	Burke	14%
Keynes	13%	The Bible	11%	'The Classics'	14%
Schumacher	13%	Marx	9%	The Bible	10%
Orwell	11%	Steinbeck	9%	Hayek	10%
Paine	11%	Foot	8%	Churchill	8%
Marx	9%	Galbraith	8%	Popper	8%
Tressell	9%	Orwell	8%	Orwell	8%
Hobhouse	6%	Bevan	8%	Hailsham	6%
Locke	6%	Shaw	8%	Macmillan	6%
Popper	6%				
Bertrand Russell	6%				

Others listed by more than one respondent (Liberal Democrats):

Berlin, Bethelheim, Chomsky, Crosland, Dahrendorf, Galbraith, Gladstone, Alexander Hamilton, Hegel, Harper Lee, Lloyd George, Rawls, James Robertson, Tawney, Tolstoy, Donald Wade.

Other Liberal thinkers are also well represented. Amongst the New Liberal philosophers, LT Hobhouse makes the top twelve, while Green, Hammond and Hobson also feature. Probably the most influential Liberal of the twentieth century, John Maynard Keynes, rates equal second place (Beveridge achieved a single citation). Tom Paine (perhaps surprisingly, completely absent from Labour MPs' influences) is mentioned by 11% of Liberal Democrats, Locke by 6%; Bentham and Smiles also warrant a mention, though Adam Smith does not. Socialist or social democratic writers - Crosland, Durbin, Tawney - are mostly, but not exclusively, mentioned by former SDP members; Marx and Robert Tressell (author of *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*) both make the top twelve.

Books on or by Liberal and Liberal Democrat politicians feature rather less strongly. Unsurprisingly, books by or about Gladstone and Lloyd George are most commonly mentioned, with Roy Jenkins, Shirley Williams and Paddy Ashdown achieving one citation apiece; Donald (Lord) Wade's 1960s promotion of the Liberal cause, *Our Aim and Purpose*, managed two.

All this seems to add up to a fairly traditional set of Liberal philosophers as major influences (reinforced by the relative absence of novelists, with the exception of Orwell, clearly an important influence on politicians of all three parties). There is, however, one outstanding exception: the influence of green economists. EF Schumacher, mainly for his *Small is Beautiful*, ranks second alongside Keynes and the Bible; James Robertson, Murray Bookchin, Herman Daly, James Lovelock (originator of the Gaia hypothesis), Jonathan Porritt, and the Club of Rome are also mentioned. The much-vaunted environmental credentials of the Liberal Democrats would seem to have their roots firmly based. None of these writers were listed by Labour or Conservative MPs.

In common with Labour and Conservative MPs, very few books published in the last five years were deemed worthy of mention. Only David Selbourne's *The Principle of Duty* received three mentions; others listed by two respondents were

Galbraith's *The Culture of Contentment*, Charles Handy's *The Empty Raincoat*, Will Hutton's *The State We're In*, Roy Jenkins' *A Life at the Centre*, Nelson Mandela's autobiography and Skidelsky's biography of Keynes.

Religion and the Arts

Although the Bible ranks second equal in Liberal Democrats' influential books, religion has by and large not had a major impact. Only a minority of respondents - 40%, compared to 48% for Labour and 65% for the Conservatives - believed that religion had had a positive impact on their political beliefs, while 44%

currently professed a religious denomination (38% for Labour, 54% for Conservatives). No particular creed stood out; while nonconformists had a major role to play in the Liberal Party of the nineteenth century, only 8% identified themselves as such now (marginally higher than Labour); 10% are C of E, 8% non-denominational Christian, 6% Roman Catholic and 6% Church of Scotland. The decline in importance of religion in politics over the century has affected the Liberal Democrats as much as it has the other parties.

Arts and entertainment similarly do not account for major influences on Liberal Democrats' beliefs. 47% believed that they had experienced no influence from this direction (67% Conservatives, 25% Labour). Of those that did, theatre (26%), film (17%) and music (11%) scored most highly, the same as Labour MPs' top three and almost the same as Conservatives'. The green influence is still detectable, however; one respondent cited 'wildlife documentaries on TV'!

Figures and events

It is in the choice of influential figures and events where Liberal Democrats again show themselves distinct from the other two parties. In common with Conservatives and Labour, the contemporary personalities of greatest influence are mostly of the same political faith - Jo Grimond (mentioned by a massive 45% of respondents, underlining his key role in the postwar Liberal revival), and the architects of the Alliance, David Steel and Roy Jenkins.

The other two figures in the top five are both Labour politicians, Hugh Gaitskell and Harold Wilson; but the latter is remembered with loathing rather than admiration - three out of the four who named him specifically referred to him as a negative influence for his lack of radicalism and principle. Several other Labour politicians - Benn, Callaghan, Crosland, Foot - also feature lower down the list. Interestingly, Benn and Foot are generally cited by former Liberals, while the less left wing Labour figures appeal to the SDP element in the respondents. The rather greater age range of the Lib Dem

sample is revealed in the personal memories of some of them of John Maynard Keynes and David Lloyd George.

Figures admired outside the Liberal Democrats (or Liberal Party or SDP) again include a number of Labour politicians: Benn, Callaghan, Frank Field and Healey were all mentioned by two or more. Three Conservative MPs - Gilmour, Heath (for taking Britain into Europe) and Hurd - also made the list. Otherwise the personalities were all non-

British, including the top two, Nelson Mandela (mentioned by 11% of respondents) and John F Kennedy (9%); Aung San Suu Kyi, Jimmy Carter, Vaclav Havel, Lyndon Johnson and the Irish President Mary Robinson were cited more than once. In contrast to the Tories, non-British influences are more important; in contrast to Labour, virtually no British non-politicians are mentioned. The largest response, however (15%) was for statements such as "I don't have heroes" or "I do not like hero-worship".

In common with the Labour and Conservative MPs, Liberal Democrats tended not to cite intellectuals as people they admired. However, 74% of them agreed with the question 'do you feel that intellectuals have made a significant contribution to the Liberal Democrats (or Liberal Party or SDP)?' One respondent went so far as to state that "all significant contributions to the Lib Dems have come from intellectuals". Only 17% gave a definite negative, and one added "this must be rectified!". This compares to 63% yes and 21% no for Labour, and 67% yes and 21% no for Conservatives. Liberal Democrats seem to see themselves as the most intellectual of the three parties. Given the Party's composition (the most middle class, and the mostly highly educated, of the three), this is hardly surprising, but the differences are not large. Furthermore, some respondents believed that while intellectuals had influenced the Liberal Party - Keynes and Beveridge were most frequently mentioned - they were largely

What event during your lifetime has had the greatest effect on your political beliefs?

Liberal Democrat		Labour		Conservative	
Suez	17%	Upbringing	14%	Labour Govt 74-9	27%
World War Two	13%	Suez	9%	Winter discontent	12%
Entry into Europe	11%	The 1960s	9%	World War Two	12%
Assassination of JFK	6%	Vietnam	7%	Cold War	10%
Collapse of USSR	6%	Starting work	6%	Advent of Thatcher	10%
No event	6%	Hungary 1956	6%	Entry into Europe	6%
				Deprived childhood	6%

Others listed by more than one respondent (Liberal Democrats):

1974 elections, advent of Thatcherism, the 'troubles' in Northern Ireland, the foundation of the SDP, the depression of the 1930s, Vietnam.

absent in the Lib Dems. While one respondent believed that intellectuals themselves probably thought they had influenced the Party, "I am not one, so could not possibly comment!"

Liberal Democrats like to think of themselves as internationalist in outlook, and the events they cite as influencing their political beliefs bear this out. Five out of the top six cited - Suez (top with 17%), the second world war (13%), British entry into Europe (11%), the assassination of Kennedy (6%) and the collapse of the Soviet Union (6%) are all to do with events overseas or British foreign policy. Others cited by more than one respondent include more domestic events, but the personal experiences quoted by Labour and Conservative MPs ('upbringing', mentioned by 14% of Labour; 'deprived childhood', mentioned by 6% of Conservatives) are absent. The Suez crisis, which helped to underpin the postwar Liberal revival, shattering the myth that the Conservative Party had incorporated Liberal values, was clearly of key importance.

In general, Liberal Democrats' political beliefs are highly influenced by books and authors, and by events outside the personal and domestic. Compared to the other two parties, the Labour pattern of responses tends to be rather closer to the Lib Dems than is the Conservative. This is not unexpected; unlike the Conservatives both parties are and have been throughout their history progressive and reformist. But the

people, books and events involved are quite different. The influence of Victorian and New Liberalism, of green economics and of recent Liberal and Social Democrat politicians define and separate Liberal Democrat political thought from other traditions on the left of British politics. Throughout most of the twentieth century it has been a less popular and successful ideology than its competitors - which perhaps accounts for the more consistent influence of Mill and Grimond; the range from which to choose is narrower - but it is distinctive and thriving.

In the early stages of your political life did any particular contemporary figure(s) stand out as an influence on you?

Liberal Democrat		Labour		Conservative	
Jo Grimond	45%	Nye Bevan	22%	Margaret Thatcher	28%
Hugh Gaitskell	11%	Harold Wilson	17%	Iain Macleod	28%
Roy Jenkins	11%	None	16%	Winston Churchill	24%
David Steel	9%	Tony Benn	13%	Harold Macmillan	18%
Harold Wilson *	9%	Michael Foot	7%	Edward Heath	10%
				Enoch Powell	10%

(* but 7% specifically mentioned Wilson as a negative influence!)

Others listed by more than one respondent (Liberal Democrats):

Tony Benn, Jim Callaghan, Anthony Crosland, Michael Foot, Edward Heath, John F Kennedy, John Maynard Keynes, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Margaret Thatcher, Shirley Williams, none.