

Peter Hennessy and Duncan Brack

Shirley Williams, the



IN 1971 SHIRLEY Williams (Baroness Williams of Crosby) was one of the sixty-nine Labour MPs who voted, against their party's three-line whip, to support Britain's application to join the European Economic Community. Ten years later she was one of the 'Gang of Four' who founded the Social Democratic Party (SDP). She served as President of the SDP from 1982 to 1987, supported the party's merger with the Liberal Party in 1988, and led the Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords from 2001 to 2004. She retired from active politics in 2016.

In October 2017 the historian Peter Hennessy (Baron Hennessy of Nympsfield and Attlee Professor of Contemporary British History at Queen Mary University of London) and Duncan Brack,

Editor of the *Journal of Liberal History*, interviewed Shirley Williams about the importance of Europe and the European project to her political beliefs and career.

PH: Shirley, when did you first acquire your own certain idea of Europe?

SW: A very long time ago. My mother, a life-long conscientious objector and pacifist, had always been very internationalist. She was the author Vera Brittain; her book, *Testament of Youth*, was widely read on the continent as well as here, and she travelled a great deal talking about it. So it was through her that I got to know Germans, Frenchmen, Belgians – lots of people who would come for meals at my parents' house.

The SDP and Europe

I became professionally fascinated at the time of the Coal and Steel Community. Coal and steel were the fundamental ingredients of warfare; every war, right back to Napoleon and even earlier, had essentially depended upon control over these two key resources. So when Jean Monnet, the great French statesman, a wonderful man and a true internationalist, thought about the first steps towards uniting Europe – and that was his objective, his dream – he very sensibly saw that the way to start was to control the raw materials of war. I got to know Monnet a bit, and others, and I began to organise a sort of youth movement, first with the Fabians, then later at Oxford University where I was a student, consisting of people with a passionate commitment to the idea of a united Europe. And when I got to the House of Commons after I was first elected in 1964, for the first time in my life I came across the sort of people who had been heroes to me, like Roy Jenkins.

[The Coal and Steel Community was first proposed in 1950 and established in 1952.] After some rather short-lived consideration, the then Labour government decided to have nothing whatsoever to do with it. They seemed to be under the impression that in all other countries except our own, these industries were private (which they were not) and not nationalised (which they were). Thanks to the fear that Britain might be required to denationalise the coal mines, the government wanted nothing more to do with it and stayed well away. The Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, wasn't actually very interested in Europe. His passion was for social justice in this country; Europe was somebody else's problem, not his.

PH: The other great opportunity to join, and to shape it, really, was the Messina talks in 1955, when the Conservatives were back in government – but for a different set of reasons, they were also very wary, and didn't think it would come to anything. Do you think that the British, or at least some of them, have an emotional deficit over the idea of Europe?

SW: I think the Tories had an emotional deficit. They saw these developments as a challenge to the history they were so proud of. Essentially, they saw the European Community as second rate

– they thought the Empire was what mattered. They hadn't yet come to terms (as they did, to be fair, over the next twenty years or so), with the idea that the Empire was over. They saw Britain going down the drain, ceasing to be the leading power of Europe, ceasing to be the great imperial power in the world, and I think they didn't in the least fancy the idea of joining this bunch of what they regarded as second-rate countries, and having to be part of a group in which we were an equal, not better than an equal.

PH: You must have been very hurt when Labour leader Hugh Gaitskell, whom you admired greatly, delivered that impassioned speech against Britain in the Common Market, at the 1962 Labour Conference.

SW: 'A thousand years of history' [the phrase Gaitskell used in opposing British entry to the EEC]. We all broke into tears.

PH: You literally cried when you heard it?

SW: Yes – and Bill Rodgers broke down in tears as well. We were both absolutely shattered. And Roy Jenkins. Because we'd all – Roy most of all, because he was very close to Gaitskell – seen ourselves as intimate admirers, if I can put it that way. But Gaitskell just got it wrong about Europe, I think partly because his wife was Jewish, and she never let him forget the Holocaust and its progenitors in Germany. Eventually, I think, he began to accept the concept of a united Europe, but he had quite strong personal reasons to find it a bad idea, and he never became enthusiastic about it.

PH: You were very keen that Harold Macmillan should succeed with the first application in 1961, I'm sure.

SW: Yes, but I didn't think it would succeed. I'd spent some time in France and I was conscious of the fact that the French had quite bitter feelings about the way in which the British thought of France as essentially having stepped out of the battle in the Second World War, and the way in which de Gaulle had been treated; a lot of Conservatives in Britain, and especially military people, agreed with Churchill, who declared that 'the greatest cross I had to carry was the cross of Lorraine'. This was not a helpful thing to say as the cross of Lorraine is a very important symbol

'I think the Tories had an emotional deficit. They saw these developments as a challenge to the history they were so proud of. Essentially, they saw the European Community as second rate – they thought the Empire was what mattered.'

Shirley Williams, the SDP and Europe

in France, of French nationalism and French courage.

PH: The second application was made in 1967 by Harold Wilson, and was blocked again by de Gaulle. And then Ted Heath got us in, in 1973.

SW: That's right. But Ted got us in rather marginally, and Ted was not popular with the Conservative Party; it wasn't an enthusiastic application.

DB: Can you explain why the Labour Party kept on changing its position on Europe, from opposition to UK membership of the EEC under Gaitskell to making the second application under Wilson, then to opposition again in the early 1970s and then to supporting membership in the mid-1970s? What was going on there?

SW: Mostly because of internal left-right battles. Although I think that the left of the Labour Party then was considerably less theoretical than it has since become, it has often seen Europe as a threat to their values. Mr Corbyn, for example, has never understood the whole nature of Christian Democracy in Europe, and has tended to read the European Union as being a great deal more conservative than it actually is. To give you an example, in Germany every firm that has more than (I think) 2,000 employees is obliged to consult their workforce on all major issues such as redundancies, pensions, apprenticeships, and so on, rather than simply implementing the decisions of the bosses. For another example, most people don't realise that it was Mrs Merkel who insisted on a minimum wage in Germany which is substantially more generous than anything we've got in Britain, and which includes people who are unskilled workers, and refugees, in a way that we wouldn't dream of doing. Of course the Conservative Party isn't interested, but the Labour Party has yet to learn that the European Union is potentially a genuine force for social democracy, much more concerned about greater equality among its people than we have any idea about. And this makes me quite angry, because I feel that Europe is consistently sold short, and we don't understand what a force for progress it could be.

DB: So support for British membership of the EU has always, then, tended to be associated with the right wing or the moderate wing of the Labour Party?

SW: That would be correct.

DB: Looking back at the decision to defy the three-line whip in the vote in 1971, which Roy Jenkins led, did you have any inkling then that that might lead eventually to a split in the Labour Party?

SW: Yes, of course I did. We all did, because of the scale of the revolt. By the bye, the vote considerably understated what it could have been; there were quite a few others who agreed with us but were persuaded not to vote with the Conservatives. To my certain knowledge a number of people refused to come over the hill because although they wanted to make sure that the vote in favour was adequately strong, they didn't particularly

'Although I think that the left of the Labour Party then was considerably less theoretical than it has since become, it has often seen Europe as a threat to their values. Mr Corbyn, for example, has never understood the whole nature of Christian Democracy in Europe, and has tended to read the European Union as being a great deal more conservative than it actually is.'

wish to put their position as a future Parliamentary Private Secretary at risk. So once they had counted the figures, and got them broadly right, they then graciously disappeared from the scene. *DB: Did you find the decision to defy the three-line whip difficult?*

SW: No, not for me. I was quite clear where I belonged.

PH: So Harold Wilson, when he returned to power in 1974, started a process of renegotiating the terms of entry which led eventually to the referendum of 1975. You knew Wilson and got on with him very well, I know. Harold, I always got the impression, was by heart a Commonwealth man but by head a Europe man.

SW: Correct. Harold Wilson was absolutely brilliant in the way that he handled the whole thing; he showed his usual ability not so much for strategy as for tactics. Essentially what Harold said to himself was: 'we have to come to terms with these people, but we've got to find a good reason why we didn't the first time round'. (The answer was partly de Gaulle, but not only – it was also a lack of enthusiasm among British civil servants and British politicians.)

So Harold then says, 'I'm going to renegotiate this' (a lesson there for some of the Brexiteers), 'and I'm going to renegotiate it through somebody who is broadly trusted and well-liked by the British public', and that was Jim Callaghan. So he sent Jim off – he was very unenthusiastic about Europe, much less enthusiastic than Harold himself – to do the renegotiation, which he did rather well. And when he came back, Harold was able to say: 'Well, we haven't got all we wanted, but we've got the most that Jim, who was a brilliant negotiator, could have got for us'. And so he took a neutral position, in a sense, between what we might get and what we were actually getting, and gradually built a stronger level of support for staying in than one would have seen at the beginning. That's what I thought was so clever.

PH: Of course, the only consistent party throughout all these years, right through to now, is the Liberals.

SW: As ever! But Jeremy Thorpe was so tied up with his own complicated life that he never really showed a great enthusiasm for Europe. I know he was pro-European, but he didn't really give it first priority. And neither was Jo Grimond a passionate tactician over Europe. He was a strategist, living in a world of poetry and spirit – lovely, but not much about negotiating hard trade terms. David Steel I think very cleverly managed to take the Liberal Party through to being enthusiastic Europeans, which made the Liberals quite distinctive from either the Conservative or Labour parties.

DB: Did you work much with the Liberals during the referendum campaign in 1975?

SW: Yes, we worked a great deal with the Liberals, but also we worked quite a lot with Conservatives like Michael Heseltine and so on. It was a genuinely all-party thing. And that was one

reason why the campaign was so effective, and had a tremendous push in it, an excitement, a feeling of happiness, achieving something and getting somewhere. All that was absent in 2016.

PH: Wasn't it during the 1975 referendum, Shirley, that there was a wonderful piece of film of you and Harold Macmillan in Parliament Square?

SW: Harold Macmillan was by this time quite an elderly gentleman. He was very polite and gracious, but quite shaky, and did not find it very easy to walk right across Parliament Square, which he was obliged to do as a former Prime Minister and the man who was seen to be leading the move to join Europe. It was after dark and there was smoke in the air from little bonfires – it was one of those wonderful autumn evenings, magical, in a way – and Macmillan slowly began to slip towards thinking that he was at the Somme or some other great First World War battle; I became aware, walking beside him and, to some extent, helping to hold him up, that he was dreaming of where he'd been sixty years before. He looked around, and he suddenly saw all these bonfires which were being lit by young people in Parliament Square – it was a very touching moment – and the smell of bonfires in the air, and the fog, and being in the middle of this huge space full of young people, carried him a long way towards not being quite sure where he was. He was close to breaking down, I think it would be fair to say, physically and spiritually, and I realised then that he had never really put behind him the experience of the First World War. It wasn't the only time that happened, but I think that that was the first time I had realised how deep and profoundly affected he had been by the war. He seemed to many people quite a jolly man, living a good life, but really, deep down, there was a profound sense of tragedy. He said 'never again' to me as I stood besides him.

PH: Looking back to that moment, the two-thirds/one-third majority in '75 to stay in ... could you ever have imagined the circumstances, even over four decades, that would lead to us coming out?

SW: I wouldn't have believed you then, particularly after that clever feint by Harold Wilson over the renegotiation, and also because some of the Labour Party's leading figures were very strongly pro-Europe. George Thomson, for example [a member of Wilson's cabinet, European Commissioner 1973–77] was always very strongly pro-Commonwealth as well but he never thought there was a clash between the two; he always thought the one could complement the other in a way that would be extremely exciting, and that would create a new world of international politics. The only country that seemed, for a while, to be rather unenthusiastic was the United States, but that was largely, I think, for the straightforward reason that they didn't really know very much about what the European Community was

meant to be about, and saw it largely in economic terms. But by this time we had begun to understand that for people like the French, and particularly people like Jean Monnet and so on, this was all about ending war forever in Europe. And if you were young – student age, perhaps – you saw this as being obvious, and inevitable, and wonderful; that was where the enthusiasm for it came from, then and earlier, from those of us who at that time were in our twenties or early thirties. We saw this as bringing about a new world.

PH: In the 1980s, Mrs Thatcher, in many ways, did a second negotiation on membership. 'Our money must come back.' It took years, and it coarsened the tone of the relationship between Britain and the European Union.

SW: Yes: it coarsened it, and it changed the nature of the relationship. It went back to being about economics.

PH: You must have regretted that.

SW: I don't know that I regretted it as much as I perhaps should have done, because I'd been trained in Oxford as an economist. One of the things I realised was that the step towards, for example, a single currency, was very difficult in countries whose economies were so very different from one another, and I think there was always a problem (and has been ever since) about the later absorption of countries in Eastern Europe. By then Mrs Thatcher was seen by many to be the disciple of the free market, and was treated as close to royalty in these countries – she got the red-carpet treatment in Poland, Bulgaria, Romania and so on – I think because she was seen by them as the essence of what it was all meant to be about: a free market, a free society, no control from powerful big government.

DB: How important was support for British membership of the European Community in the formation of the SDP in 1981, alongside everything else?

SW: Oh, much the most important. The reasons why the four of us [the Gang of Four] decided to break away and create our own party had much more to do with our individual commitment to Europe than anything else. And we got within a matter of days hundreds and hundreds and hundreds, thousands and thousands of letters, a lot of them containing donations; I think the majority of them were deeply concerned about the possibility of Britain breaking away from Europe.

DB: Throughout the lifetime of the SDP, I don't remember Europe being an issue where there was much dissent within the party?

SW: There was almost none.

DB: But David Owen, eventually, voted for Brexit. Would you have predicted that, when you were together in the SDP?

SW: I'm not sure how long it will last. David is a man with very strong opinions, but he also is quite capable of changing them, as he's done in terms of what political party he supports, quite frequently. I know him well, and he's a man of

'The reasons why the four of us [the Gang of Four] decided to break away and create our own party had much more to do with our individual commitment to Europe than anything else.'

'When one looks at the areas where Britain is strong, things like science, engineering, aerospace, the sustaining of nature ... and when one look also at our culture and the emergence of things like great writing, great art and so forth, all these things suggest that our natural home is Europe, not floating around looking for somebody that we can seize on and make into an ally, whether or not their own proclivities and values are the same as ours.'

passionate views, but those views to some extent reflect the major issues of the time. He may have decided for the time being to go for Brexit, but I don't somehow feel that it's a lasting commitment.

PH: Shirley, when you look at the whole sweep of the forty-six years of our membership of the EU, much of your professional life was devoted in one way or another to getting us in and keeping us in. It's almost coterminous with your life, really, certainly at the top of politics. It must be very difficult to contemplate now that it's almost certainly going to be all over within the next few years. Do you wonder what you might have done, or what you might have said, or that you and Roy could have played it this way rather than that way, to avoid the path from entry to Brexit?

SW: Well, first I have to say quite loudly and clearly that my view is that it's not all over. I think there is a real chance that as people get to know more and more about what is actually happening, they will begin to think very hard about whether they want to go in this direction. There is an awful lot of factual information which is only gradually becoming known. I'll give you one example from my old constituency, where British Aerospace, the main employer, has already announced that they are going to have 2,000 redundancies, and that won't be the end of it, I think, unless we're very lucky. We've seen the way in which the United States is not sympathising with us, or with anyone, over international trade. The illusion of the Brexiteers that somehow Britain can write the menu is absurd. It's not writing the menu now, and it's not likely to start writing the menu in 2019 or 2020.

We know already that it is not easy for us to live with the new American President, because some of the things that he wants are things that we do not want, like the possible ending of the Iranian nuclear deal. We find ourselves, inevitably on issues of that kind, closer to our European neighbours than to our American neighbours. The special relationship isn't really there any more, and the way in which the present President treats the memory and the legacy of Barack Obama, and the way in which he has taken his stand on major issues internationally, suggests that he has no interest in bringing it back. And his views on race relations are not ones that exactly commend themselves to many members of the Commonwealth. So we are putting at risk not just ourselves, but also our relationships with the rest of the world. That seems to be something that a lot of our Conservative colleagues are completely unaware of.

The third thing I would say is that when one looks at the areas where Britain is strong, things like science, engineering, aerospace, the sustaining of nature (because we are getting better and better at that), and when one look also at our culture and the emergence of things like great writing, great art and so forth, all these things suggest that our natural home is Europe, not floating

around looking for somebody that we can seize on and make into an ally, whether or not their own proclivities and values are the same as ours.

PH: Can I frame the question another way? Do you not think, looking back at the referendum of 1975 in which you played such an active part with Roy Jenkins, that there is something that you and Roy, and the group around you, might have done, might have said, might have tried, in the intervening years, that would have headed all this off, that would have kept us in quite nicely?

SW: I tried to play my part in last year's campaign. I went to the people who were supposed to be in favour of Remain. I offered them three months of unadulterated time, up and down the country, since I had retired from the House of Lords. I offered to pay all own expenses. I came up with speakers for Labour audiences, people like George Robertson [Labour cabinet minister under Blair and former Secretary General of NATO]. They all agreed to speak on mixed platforms, to people of different parties but sharing the same commitment to Europe – Greens, Lib Dems, quite a lot of Labour people, some Conservatives. One lesson that I had learned from 1975 was 'do not present a party argument', present an all-party argument, and then let people discuss it as much as they will, because they will be so attracted to the idea of being free to have a real discussion across parties that they will pour in to listen; in 1975 they did, in their hundreds.

PH: What happened when you made that offer?

SW: Nothing happened at all. I rang them up and said 'would you help me do this?', and they said no. I came up with the names of my half a dozen outstanding Labour friends, people who had immense respect, who had held very high office, who were very well liked in the Labour Party, all of whom were very strong pro-Europeans. But when I asked them: 'can you help me by providing people to take leaflets out and advertise the meetings, and so on?', they said 'no, we can't'. They said to me in quite clear terms that they weren't interested in addressing Labour audiences. At the end I got the impression that a lot of the Remain power, and the Remain finances, went for one particular objective which I had been foolish enough not to fully understand, and that was to kill off UKIP. UKIP was the only really serious threat to the Conservatives. I am very angry about this, right up to this moment ...

PH: In 1975, you and Roy Jenkins, and Ted Heath, sang a song of Europe pure. But this time, the people who were leading the Remain campaign were by and large caveating their support for Europe. There was a note of regret, it doesn't work here, it's no good there ... hardly anybody sang a song of Europe pure.

SW: Hardly anybody. There was no song of Europe.

PH: And that's what you would have done.

SW: Yes.