

Appreciation

Dick Newby looks back at the life and career of one of the Gang of Four who founded the SDP and who went on to become a much-loved Liberal Democrat peer.

Shirley Williams (27 Jul



Shirley Williams campaigning for the SDP at the Crosby by-election in 1981

IN MY FIRST term at Oxford in 1971, I joined the Labour Club. Labour was relatively recently out of office, many of its leaders were Oxford alumni, and in that autumn term, every week, we had the opportunity to hear and meet a different former cabinet minister. I was star struck, but I can remember only two of the visitors. One was Tony Crosland, who dazzled us over drinks and cigars after the meeting. Shirley was the other.

My acquaintance with Shirley really began as a co-member of the committee of the Labour Committee for Europe, where I attended as secretary of Young European Left, a small but enthusiastic youth wing of the broader committee. I got to know her well when I joined the staff of the SDP in spring 1981, and particularly when, in her role as president of the party,

which she held from 1982 to 1988, I briefed her on every National Committee meeting and conference session – every one of which she chaired.

On joining the Lords in 1997, I then served under her during her time as leader and, when I became leader myself, I was nominally her leader. By then Shirley was almost upon retirement from the Lords, but even when retired she was a regular visitor to my office, always bursting with ideas and plans.

I was therefore able to see, work with and appreciate Shirley for almost forty years. She was, throughout, a personal supporter and became a good friend. I don't think my assessment of her is seen through rose-tinted spectacles, but it is certainly suffused with a great deal of affection.

ly 1930 – 11 April 2021)

Hinterland

By the time Shirley entered the Commons in 1964, aged 34, she had crammed into her life a range of experience which is impossible to contemplate for a contemporary politician. She was born in 1930 into the Labour Party elite. Her mother, Vera Brittain, was a renowned writer – *Testament of Youth* being one of the seminal accounts of life and loss during the First World War – an anti-war campaigner and a strong feminist. Her father was political scientist Professor Sir George Catlin, an unsuccessful Labour politician. If she inherited views on international relations and feminism from her mother, she inherited a strong degree of intellectual curiosity and concern for social justice from her father.

Because of their prominence in Labour circles, her parents were on a Nazi hit-list if an invasion took place. To protect Shirley, she was sent with her brother, unaccompanied, to Minnesota in 1940. She was already an accomplished actor, and whilst in the US narrowly lost out to Elizabeth Taylor to play the lead in the film *National Velvet*.

She returned to the UK in 1943 and attended St Paul's Girls School (which she hated) and Talbot Heath School in Bournemouth (which she loved). Before university, her interest in and support for the European ideal was sparked by participating in a Labour League of Youth visit to the youth wing of the Germany Social Democrats. She studied at Somerville College, Oxford, from 1948. She read PPE and starred in politics (first woman to be president of the Labour Club) and on stage (where she played Cordelia to the Lear of Peter Parker, later chairman of British Rail).

On leaving Oxford, she spent a year at Columbia University (New York), worked as a journalist at the *Daily Mirror* (improbably as a gossip columnist) and the *FT*, and spent a term lecturing in Ghana before becoming general secretary of the Fabian Society, succeeding Bill Rodgers, who had been a fellow officer of the Oxford University Labour Club. She first stood

for parliament in the unwinnable Harwich by-election in 1954, stood again in the seat in 1955, in Southampton Test in 1959, before winning the Hitchin seat in 1964.

So, unlike some of the slightly older men who dominated the Labour Party in the Wilson years – Jenkins, Healey, Crosland – who had actively participated in the Second World War, Shirley had not been directly involved in the war effort. But with a pacifist mother, her experience of exile, and her visits to Germany and the US, she had an acute sense of the downsides of conflict and the benefits of international – Atlantic and European – cooperation.

This experience meant that by the time she became an MP she had a well-thought-through set of beliefs. Those beliefs – principally a passion for social justice and a conviction that peace and prosperity required Britain to be at the heart of Europe – remained with her and animated her whole political career.

Labour MP

Once elected, and during the 1964–70 Labour governments, Shirley moved steadily up the slippery pole. After being PPS to the secretary of state for health, (1964–66) she became successively parliamentary secretary for labour (1966–67), minister of state for education (1967–69) and served at the Home Office (1969–70). Over this period, the issue which brought her to public notice and controversy was her support for and implementation of the policy of introducing comprehensive schools. This was not her initiative – Anthony Crosland as secretary of state was the prime mover – but it became a policy personally associated with her to such an extent that, even decades later, it was regularly raised by its critics on the doorsteps and in the studios. She was however a passionate supporter of the policy and gave no quarter in promoting it.

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health and social security spokesman and the shadow home secretary (1972).

The great internal Labour row in opposition was over Europe. Harold Wilson had begun negotiations for entry in the period before the 1970 election, but when the party's conference voted on the issue at a special conference in 1971, it opposed entry by a ratio of 5–1. When the legislation facilitating Britain's membership came to the Commons in October 1971, Shirley and sixty-seven colleagues supported it. Whilst Roy Jenkins and several other frontbenchers resigned to campaign and vote in favour of membership, Shirley, along with Roy Hattersley remained on the front bench. It was a measure of Shirley's popularity in the party that much opprobrium was heaped on Hattersley, but much less on her.

Her rebellion did however have consequences. She performed badly in the subsequent shadow cabinet election and was demoted to spokesperson on prices. She retained this brief after the 1974 general election, becoming secretary of state for prices and consumer protection in the new Wilson government. It was an impossible job. Prices rose by 27 per cent under her watch, but blame was – reasonably – not attached primarily to her.

The first part of the 1974 parliament was dominated by the first European referendum. Along with Roy Jenkins, Shirley headed up the Labour pro-European campaign, touring the country with her hallmark verve and panache.

When Wilson resigned as PM in 1976, Shirley stood, not for the leadership as some of her supporters wanted, but for the deputy leadership. She lost to Michael Foot by 166 votes to 128. She remained at Prices and Consumer Protection until Callaghan made her secretary of state for education later in 1976. At his behest she launched a 'Great Debate' on education standards and toured the country to discuss the issue. It was a largely barren exercise: too many vested interests argued their corner and no consensus for change emerged. She oversaw a number of lasting changes however, including the shift from O-levels to GCSEs.

By most standards she was an effective education secretary, but was criticised for not having achieved more. Given the entrenched sectional interests in the sector and the parlous state of the government, particularly as the parliament wore on, this was unfair.

SDP

In the 1979 election, lost by Labour in the aftermath of the Winter of Discontent, there was

a particularly large swing against the government in northern Home Counties commuter seats, where the Conservative manifesto's promise to allow the sale of council houses to their tenants proved popular with the better off amongst their number. Stevenage was one of these seats and Shirley was out of parliament. She remained a member of Labour's NEC as the party adopted policies on Europe, defence, and internal party democracy with which she – and other moderates – strongly disagreed.

The catalyst for a break with Labour came in the form of Roy Jenkins' Dimpleby Lecture of 22 November 1979, made as he prepared to leave Brussels as president of the EEC Commission and contemplated a return to domestic politics. In it, he criticised the rigidity of British society and politics, called for 'more change accompanied by more stability of direction' and argued that this could be achieved by the 'strengthening of the radical centre'. The lecture stimulated discussions about a new centre-left party. Shirley's initial reaction (which came back to haunt her) was that such a party, would have 'no roots, no principles, no philosophy and no values'. But Jenkins had let a genie out of the bottle. Many people – not least a young Charles Kennedy – were inspired by his critique and his prescription. And it precipitated a period of intense discussion amongst those Labour MPs most dissatisfied with the party's direction about whether to take the plunge.

The Labour conferences of autumn 1980 and January 1981 proved the final straws. In the autumn, following the left's conference victories and Michael Foot's election as Labour leader (beating Denis Healey), Williams cut her links with her constituency. After the special January conference, which gave the unions an unprecedented 50 per cent stake in electing the party leader and which booed David Owen, the break became inevitable.

The following day at Owen's house in Limehouse, the 'Gang of Four' – Shirley, Jenkins, Owen, and Rodgers published the Limehouse Declaration, which echoed the Dimpleby Lecture themes and called for the creation of a Council for Social Democracy. An advert bearing 100 signatures of politicians and other centre-left luminaries was placed in *The Guardian* and literally tens of thousands of people signed up within days. The original intention had been to launch the new party – the Social Democratic Party – in the autumn. But the momentum was so great that the party was launched in March, with media interest and a surge of support which not only included Labour moderates and a small number of Conservatives, but also

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drew in a large number of people drawn from the professional middle classes who were new to politics – the so-called ‘political virgins’.

These were heady days, but it was impossible without fighting any elections to know what the voters made of it all. A chance soon presented itself with a parliamentary by-election, held in Warrington on 16 July 1981. Shirley was the obvious candidate. She was the most popular of the Gang of Four and, as a Catholic, was in a strong position to appeal to the constituency’s large Catholic electorate. The candidacy was hers for the taking but she refused. She later wrote that ‘I did not dither. I quailed.’ In the event, Jenkins only lost the seat by 1,759 votes. Shirley might well have won it. As I saw at first hand, she established an easy rapport with voters in Warrington in a way which Jenkin’s never could. He was respected, but she evoked affection. Shunning Warrington was probably her biggest political mistake.

Why did she quail? There were, certainly, several factors, but I have no doubt that a lack of a supportive partner was a major one. Having married philosophy don Bernard Williams in 1955, she was by now divorced. The other three members of the Gang of Four had hugely supportive wives, who provided emotional and practical support which Shirley completely lacked. The whole SDP venture had been draining as well as exhilarating. Without a partner to support her, the huge risk of Warrington was one which she just couldn’t face on her own.

Another opportunity soon presented itself, however, and Shirley fought and won the Crosby by-election in November 1981, with a majority of 5,288. It proved, however, a short-lived triumph. Following boundary changes, she lost the seat in the 1993 general election by 3,401 votes. She never returned to the Commons.

From day one, a key challenge for the SDP was how to calibrate and manage its relations with the Liberal Party. Roy Jenkins was very comfortable about having the closest possible relations. David Owen bristled at the prospect. Shirley took a pragmatic view. She realised from the start that the two parties would have to work together and described the SDP as the ‘heterosexual wing of the Liberal Party’. She had good relations with David Steel and the pair posed on the grass in Dean’s Yard, Westminster, in the spring of 1981 to launch a joint policy programme, looking for all the world like a pair of starry-eyed newly-weds. At the autumn conference of the Liberal Party in Llandudno she, along with Jenkins, spoke at a wildly enthusiastic rally to help persuade the Liberals formally to support the Alliance.

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Owen later accused Williams of never wanting the SDP to have a long-term independent future and to have secretly conspired for an eventual merger of the two parties from the start. This wasn’t true. She did support a merger after the 1987 election, but that was far from her mind in 1981.

As a new party, the SDP operated with a collective leadership comprising the Gang of Four – each member taking a monthly turn to chair the senior committees and be *primus inter pares*. It didn’t work well and, as soon as the party adopted a constitution, it elected a single leader. Shirley declined to stand, supporting Owen against Jenkins (who won). Instead she was elected as party president, a position she then held for the remainder of the party’s independent life. In that position she chaired its National Committee and sessions of its thrice-yearly conference. She had influence – but was always the second most important figure in the party. When Owen became leader after the 1983 election, his opposition to closer relations with the Liberals and support for a more free-market economic policy was opposed by Shirley, but she could do nothing to prevent it.

After the failure of the Alliance in the 1987 general election to present a coherent national campaign (largely because of differences between Owen and Steel both on strategy and style) or to win a significant number of seats (a loss of one to a mere twenty-two) demands in the SDP to merge with the Liberals became unstoppable. A membership ballot was held, and the pro-merger side won by 57 per cent to 43 per cent – a clear but not overwhelming majority, largely because of the advocacy of Owen for continued independence. Shirley supported the merger, as did Jenkins and Rodgers, not least because she had seen the benefits of the *de facto* merger of the two parties in Cambridge, where she had just stood unsuccessfully for the Alliance.

The period from August 1987 to April 1988, when the merger formally took effect, was extremely unpleasant for all involved in the SDP at national level. The Owenites, though defeated in the merger ballot, had a majority of one on the National Committee (chaired by Shirley) and made every attempt to salvage what they could of the assets and branding of the party for their planned continuity SDP. Meanwhile, merger negotiations between the parties – centring on the drafting of a new constitution – were tortuous. Shirley played a constructive part in these, although nearly derailed them by proposing that the name of the new party should simply be the ‘Democrats’. This



prompted a threat of a walkout by several Liberals including Alan Beith, on the basis that they were not prepared to be members of a party which didn't have the word 'Liberal' in the title. So we ended up with 'Social and Liberal Democrats' – an inelegant mouthful which was soon shortened to the current 'Liberal Democrats'.

She chaired the final SDP conference in Sheffield in January 1988, showing her occasional ruthlessness by exercising to the full her right as chair to call speakers. She ensured that the least effective opponents of the merger spoke at the key points in the debate. The vote for the merger – though never in doubt – was duly carried by a large majority.

The Liberal Democrats

Out of Parliament and with no formal position in the newly formed Lib Dems, Shirley moved to the US as professor at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and, with the fall of the Berlin Wall and apartheid, she championed the cause of democracy internationally and helped draft the constitutions of Russia, Ukraine and South Africa.

She received a peerage in 1993 and was leader of the Lib Dem group in the Lords from 2001 to 2004, becoming the third member of the Gang of Four to do so, succeeding Jenkins and Rodgers. She spoke with her usual passion and persuasion in the Lords, not least in seeking and achieving amendments to the Coalition's 2011 Health and Social Care Bill. But she regarded the Lords as an outdated, idiosyncratic institution (as indeed it is) and was much happier doing media performances, for which she remained in high demand.

She formally retired from the Lords in 2016 at the age of 85, having shown the first signs of physical and mental decline. She went out in style with a lavish party in the Commons' Speaker's House complete with concert pianist and laudatory speeches. But she immediately regretted it. Having had the party, however, the die was cast. This didn't deter her from being a regular visitor to the Lords, which usually involved an unannounced visit to my office where she invariably had a minimum of three ideas which, if implemented, would transform the party's fortunes, win the Brexit referendum or derail the government's Brexit plans.

Shirl the Pearl

A recitation of Shirley's tangible achievements in political office does not begin to tell the whole story of her contribution to British political life.

She had an infectious enthusiasm for political ideas and activity. She believed that politics was an honourable calling and passionately encouraged people – particularly young people and women – to take up a political vocation. She was a brilliant listener – head cocked, encouraging smile – and was willing to spend time discussing politics with anyone, anywhere, any time. Speaking from a public platform she brought conviction, sincerity, and enthusiasm. On radio and TV, she demonstrated the same qualities, making her a very frequent performer on flagship programmes such as *Question Time* and *Any Questions*.

She connected with people to a remarkable extent. People who met her by chance on the street or on a train felt that they could speak to her almost as if she was an old friend. Other

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politicians with whom I've worked – particularly Charles Kennedy and Paddy Ashdown – had some of this instant recognition and rapport, but none of them could match Shirley. In the Alliance years, she became known as 'Shirl the Pearl' – a sobriquet which reflected this attraction and the affection which she invoked. Her charm and zest for life and for politics shine through her 2009 autobiography, *Climbing the Bookshelves*.

What was her secret? Part of it was that she liked to be liked and subconsciously tried hard to make people like her. Partly it was a genuine interest in people and their views. And partly it was a natural charisma, which like that of other charismatic leaders – Obama, Clinton, Mandela – is innate.

The downside of wanting to be popular, however, meant that she took on far too many engagements than the calendar allowed. She gained a reputation, deservedly, for often being late, as she tried to bend time to her calendar with predictable results. SDP staff developed the concept of 'Shirley time' and would often schedule meetings in her diary for fifteen or thirty minutes earlier than the real start time, simply to ensure that she arrived punctually.

But there was a further reason for this apparent disorganisation. Shirley, during the peak of her career, was a single mother, juggling running a household, bringing up daughter Becky and organising her own life with completely inadequate support. Until she remarried – her second husband was Dick Neustadt, a widowed Harvard academic and old friend – she had to carry the burden of personal and political decision-making entirely on her own shoulders. And unlike other members of the Gang of Four, and following the death of her trusted and shrewd aide John Lyttle early on in the life of the SDP, she lacked both a senior day-to-day political advisor and first-class administrative back-up.

This lack of support and the disorganisation which it engendered extended to aspects of her political performance. She rarely if ever had a prepared version of major speeches ready for distribution to the media in advance of their delivery. Indeed, her speaking notes were often an indecipherable mixture of typed text, crossings out and spidery handwritten additions, often inserted at oblique angles to the main text. The result was usually a passionate and inspirational speech for her live audience. But it had the media scrabbling with their shorthand.

If she had been a man, these issues wouldn't have mattered as much. We can all think of disorganised male politicians. But it was used as a stick to beat Shirley, which both rankled her and diminished her standing.

What ifs

With any politician, it's interesting to speculate what might have happened if only a different choice had been made at crucial points in their career. With Shirley, three stand out.

If she had been elected deputy leader of the Labour Party in 1976 instead of Michael Foot, would she have ever left the party? It is probable that she would not. The SDP, even if it had been established as an independent party (rather than Jenkins simply joining the Liberal Party), would clearly have been much weakened.

Second, if she had stood in Warrington and won, which she might well have done, would she have become leader of the SDP? I think that she would. The pressure for her to stand against Jenkins for the leadership would have been unstoppable. And in such a contest she would almost certainly have won. All the trauma about Ettrick Bridge and Jenkins' perceived weaknesses as leader during the 1983 general election would have been avoided, as would the futile and draining issues about seat selections during the 1883–87 parliament. And the Alliance would have presented a more united front at both the 1983 and 1987 general elections. Peter Mandelson was concerned in the run-up to the 1987 election that Labour might come third behind the Alliance. With Williams as SDP leader, this fear might have been realised.

And finally, if Shirley had had a strong marriage, such as the other members of the Gang of four did, during the main period of her political career, she would almost certainly not have developed to the same extent a reputation and indeed track record of disorganisation which dogged her. More importantly she would have enjoyed the benefits of a loving and fulfilling private life, which her later marriage to Dick Neustadt belatedly brought her.

Shirley Williams, like all of us, was a product of her time. The people and influences which shaped her political career were unique to that period. But her standout qualities of empathy, enthusiasm, and the belief that that political activity in support of a fair and tolerant society is a noble cause are timeless. And it is for these qualities for which she deserves to be remembered.

Dick Newby is Leader of the Liberal Democrat group in the House of Lords. He was formerly Chief Executive of the SDP, chief of staff to Charles Kennedy, Treasury spokesperson and Chief Whip in the Lords. Before the formation of the SDP he was an active Labour Party member.