

# Report

## Shirley Williams: Liberal Lion and Trailblazer

Liberal Democrat History Group fringe meeting, 17 March 2023, with Mark Peel, Lord Tom McNally and Baroness Julie Smith. Chair: Baroness Judith Jolly  
Report by **Neil Stockley**

AS A LIBERAL Democrat icon, Shirley Williams stood alongside Paddy Ashdown and Charles Kennedy. David Steel once described her as ‘a national treasure, rather like the late Queen Mum’. This meeting discussed Shirley’s appeal to liberals and sought to understand her political legacy.

Mark Peel, Shirley’s biographer, described her as ‘a doughty campaigner, a brilliant communicator, a champion of progressive causes and a woman of charm and integrity’. Had the fates been kinder to her and the Labour Party not self-destructed when she was coming into her prime, he suggested, Shirley could have held high office for a long time.

But he argued that Shirley’s legacy ‘lies more in the quality of her personality than in her legislative or administrative achievements’.

### Education

Mark Peel began by examining Shirley’s record on education. First, he described her

achievements as higher education minister during the late 1960s. At a time of university expansion and student unrest, she gave students representation on academic courts and university boards and student unions more autonomy.

Shirley was prescient in recognising that with a slowing economy, the country’s generous provision for universities would no longer be sustainable. Shirley proposed her ‘thirteen points’ aimed at enabling universities to cut their costs without compromising quality. The higher education sector rejected the plan. Her response – that they would have to adapt or eventually find themselves short of funds – was vindicated during the 1980s.

Mark Peel painted a more mixed picture of Shirley’s time as education secretary after 1976. She faced a growing crisis in state education as right-wing academics and papers lambasted the government over the performance of comprehensive schools and called for a return to ‘more traditional values’. The prime minister, Jim Callaghan,

responded by launching his great educational debate. He left it to Shirley put in place a new national curriculum, a new 16-plus exam, and better vocational opportunities for all.

Shirley’s ‘procrastination while she consulted all and sundry’ frustrated Callaghan and when her Green Paper finally appeared, six months later than expected, Number 10 found its proposals ‘sparse and complacent in tone’. Whilst improvements were made, nothing of substance had been implemented by the time Labour left office in 1979.

Mark Peel believed that Shirley’s most important legacy from her time in government ‘for better or for worse’, was her campaign against the grammar schools. By the time she had finished, some 400 grammar schools remained.

To her supporters, Shirley helped create a fairer education system provided greater opportunities for the majority. Her opponents believed that the abolition of grammar schools eroded academic standards especially at top of the ability range. He also noted Robert Skidelsky’s observation that an unintended consequence of the demise of direct grant and grammar schools was a boost to the struggling independent education sector.

The meeting did not pursue these issues, but Shirley’s Labour, SDP and Liberal Democrat colleague Tom McNally provided some

important context He pointed out that Margaret Thatcher, as education secretary under Edward Heath, closed more grammar schools than Shirley. The political debate over education from the 1970s to the 1990s was highly ideological and the legacy of a strengthened independent schools sector, Tom McNally suggested, was the 'sclerosis of mobility' that we see today.

### Europe and foreign policy

Mark Peel went on to highlight the fortitude and foresight that Shirley displayed as a Labour MP over Britain's role in Europe. Like many Labour intellectuals who entered the Commons in the 1960s, she had long been a passionate European. She recognised that wages, pensions and paid holidays were higher in the Common Market countries. Shirley also understood that the UK on its own would have little influence in a world dominated by great powers.

After Labour returned to opposition in 1970, however, anti-European sentiment grew steadily within the party, and its internal divisions worsened. Labour seized on the European issue as a stick with which to beat Edward Heath's unpopular Conservative government and in October 1971 opposed the terms of entry into the European Economic Community (EEC) that Heath had negotiated. Mark Peel argued that

Shirley showed considerable courage by becoming one of the 69 Labour MPs who defied the whip to vote with the government. After being reprimanded by her constituency Labour party, Shirley privately despaired to the point where she considered retiring from politics.

But she stayed and joined Wilson's new Cabinet in 1974. In the run-up to the 'in or out' referendum the following year, she was prominent in the 'Yes' campaign, arguing that the EEC was a vital market for British exports and membership essential for raising peoples' standard of living. There was no doubt, Mark Peel said, that she was by this time fully committed to the European ideal.

Tom McNally also paid tribute to Shirley's courage and recalled that she was 'a fighter to the very end over Europe'. (Interestingly, his remark that if Shirley were alive today, he was sure 'she would be urging the Liberal Democrats to be brave about Europe' brought a warm burst of applause from the audience.)

Julie Smith added that Shirley's experiences of being evacuated to the United States during World War II, and lecturing at Harvard during the 1980s and 1990s were important in shaping her foreign policy analysis and her internationalist principles. Shirley rejected the notion that the UK had to choose between the United States and Europe;

she understood that it was possible to be both an Atlanticist and a European.

Julie Smith reminded us that Shirley's internationalism had other, important dimensions. In the early 1980s, she visited Poland and campaigned with the Solidarity trade union. Later, she worked passionately and consistently in support of the new democracies and advocated of democracy, European integration and enlargement for the countries of central and eastern Europe.

Julie Smith added that Shirley was a sophisticated analyst of international affairs. In 2010, for instance, she advocated gradual reductions in the UK's nuclear weapons capability which, she argued, could encourage other countries to do the same as part of a global move toward nuclear disarmament. Julie acknowledged that Shirley was speaking in much less perilous times than we live in today, but said her proposal demonstrated how she 'sought to change the world stage by stage rather than overnight and in a way that would not be effective'.

### Leadership

The discussion of Shirley's personal strengths and weaknesses provided the most interesting insights into her legacy. Mark Peel described her as an immensely talented politician with cross-party appeal; she was as having the potential to be the first

## Report: Shirley Williams: Liberal Lion and Trailblazer

woman prime minister. But when opportunities came her way, she seized them only half-heartedly, as happened in the 1976 contest with Michael Foot for the Labour deputy leadership, or refused to stand at all, as with the first SDP leadership election in 1982.

Mark Peel suggested that Shirley may have been sufficiently self-aware to realise that 'she wasn't cut out for leadership'. He suggested three reasons. The first was Shirley's 'rather disorganised lifestyle' as illustrated by her lack of punctuality and untidy appearance. Second, she disliked having responsibility in that it restricted her freedom and independence and she loathed media intrusion into her personal life. Third, and perhaps most important, she lacked the confidence to take on the 'less forgiving' side of political leadership – managing rivals, disciplining colleagues and taking unpopular decisions. At no stage did she court the press, build up a close-knit body of supporters or lead a sophisticated private office.

Mark Peel quoted the former Labour MP David Marquand who once said that 'Shirley was a very bad politician because she didn't realise how strong she was'. She could deploy her political passion to great effect, Mark Peel said, as she showed in her tirade against the hard left at the 1980 Labour Party conference. Even so, 'her undoing lay in her failure to gamble', he concluded.

As her friend David Alton once observed, 'she lacked the killer instinct' needed to win and hold a leadership role.

Tom McNally suggested that being the daughter of Vera Brittain 'cast a long shadow over her . . . she always felt she was working in her mother's shadow'.

His main contention was that while Shirley may have had faults that prevented her from reaching the top, she simply had 'bad luck' in that 'time and chance did not arrive for her'. Political careers, Tom explained, were affected by so many external factors, including luck, as well as hard work, intellect and strength that it was hard to make definitive judgements. 'The real loser was us,' he said ruefully, 'because we lost a great woman prime minister'.

Tom advanced the familiar argument that if Shirley had fought the 1981 Warrington by election, she would have won and then gone on to become the SDP's first leader, instead of Roy Jenkins. He believed that with Shirley and David Steel as joint leaders, the SDP–Liberal Alliance would have made the electoral breakthrough that eluded the party in 1983 and 1987. Jenkins, he explained, was 'too big a figure' to make a new party's appeal to a new generation but Shirley and David Steel 'encapsulated what people wanted from a new party'. Shirley's refusal to contest Warrington has always seemed

to me a notable example of her failure to seize big opportunities when they came along rather than of bad luck. In any case, as David Steel himself pointed out via Zoom, whoever led the Alliance would have had to contend with the 'Falklands factor' that was so important in Mrs Thatcher's 1983 election victory.

All three speakers described the many personal qualities that made Shirley such a positive force in British politics. Even if she did not live up to her early potential, Mark Peel said, she was a brilliant campaigner, orator, media performer and teacher of politics at Harvard. He described her as an exemplary public servant of great integrity. One of her most important achievements, he said, had been to give women a voice in politics.

Tom McNally paid tribute to her 'amazing intellect' and her consistent ability to intervene in House of Lords debates with 'a stream of eloquent, articulate, grammatical speech [which was] almost always radical, brave and incisive'. She was a source of inspiration to millions. He recalled walking with her on one of the last anti-Brexit marches down Whitehall and being continually stopped by people coming up to speak with her, saying things like 'Shirley, you changed my life' or 'Shirley, you were the person that brought me into politics'.

Even if Shirley was never a party leader, Julie Smith agreed, she led by example, inspiring and empowering other women politicians. Tom Nally recalled that when Shirley first became an MP, in 1964, there were very few women in the Commons and Labour's talented 'alpha males' were very difficult to survive with. The younger women politicians of more recent times had not appreciated fully how difficult it had been for her but 'they stand on the shoulders of people like Shirley who had to operate politics in a far, far more hostile world for women', he argued.

During the question-and-answer session, Tom observed that she demonstrated great integrity in deciding to leave the Labour Party, primarily because it had become very anti-Europe and she could not survive Harold Wilson-style contortions. 'That's politics but you also need politicians prepared to take a hit for integrity', he remarked. Mark Peel recalled that Shirley was paid well for appearing on *Any Questions* but often asked for the money to go to charity, without making a public point of her virtue. The day after she lost her Crosby seat in 1983, Shirley fulfilled an engagement at a local school, even though she was surrounded by tv cameras. Although the hard left denigrated and abused her as she fell out with the Labour Party, Shirley hardly

ever bad-mouthed other politicians.

Shirley's political style was summed up best by Julie Smith who grew up in Crosby and, at the age of twelve, worked on her successful by-election campaign in November 1981. Julie remembered her as an 'inspirational' campaigner and recalled her charisma and charm. 'Shirley would look you in the eye; whoever you were, wherever you came from, she would treat you as an equal', Julie said. She was willing to talk to anyone and could mingle with all sorts of people. Everyone called Shirley by her first name, she recalled.

Julie Smith recounted that a function after the

by-election, she posed a question to Shirley who responded, 'That's a very intelligent question'. 'Maybe that's because of the school I go to', replied Julie, who attended a private school. 'She didn't try to put me down', Julie remembered, and wondered 'how many politicians would just say, "I will accept what a young girl is saying"? So many would want to have the last word.'

'Shirley didn't – she inspired by her passion and integrity, not by putting people down', Julie concluded, 'and that's a pretty important legacy'.

*Neil Stockley is a member of the Liberal Democrat History Group executive.*

## Reviews

### Liberals in Scotland

David Torrance, *A History of the Scottish Liberals and Liberal Democrats* (Edinburgh University Press, 2022)

Review by **Jim Wallace**

SCOTTISH POLITICAL HISTORY is being well served by David Torrance. Not only has he written biographies on George Younger, David Steel, Alex Salmond and Nicola Sturgeon, he has also published books on the Secretaries of

State for Scotland, the relationship between Margaret Thatcher and Scotland ('*We in Scotland*': *Thatcherism in a Cold Climate*) and the relationship between nationalism and unionism in Scotland (*Standing Up for Scotland*). He has now indicated his intention