

WOMEN WHO MADE BRITAIN

SHIRLEY WILLIAMS

During the last half of the 20th Century the rights and freedoms of women had come a long way and consequently there were fewer 'firsts' to fulfil. In the realm of politics and leadership, the right to vote, to sit in parliament, be a cabinet minister and even be Prime Minister had been won.

However, I feel that in the passion, drive and integrity stakes, Shirley Williams should be remembered for her contribution to providing a more balanced third political party in the SDP (now Liberal Democrats) and through her continuing presence in the House of Lords. I admire her greatly and feel there are few women politicians today that could hold a candle to her.

Shirley Vivian Teresa Brittain Williams

Born: July 27, 1930, Chelsea, London. Educated: St Paul's Girls' School, Somerville College, Oxford, Columbia University, New York.

Career: 1960-64 Fabian Society general secretary; '67-69 minister of state for education and science; '74-76 secretary of state for prices and consumer protection, secretary of state for education; '81 SDP co-founder; '82-88 SDP president; '88- professor of elective politics, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard; 2001-04 Liberal Democrat Leader in the House of Lords.

Books: 1981 Politics is for People, '85 A Job to Live, 2003 God and Caesar.

Shirley Williams was born into a family of left wing intellectuals, immersed in politics and strong convictions. She was named Shirley after the argumentative heroine of the Charlotte Bronte novel of the same name. Her father was Sir George Caitlin, a political academic and well-connected Labour activist. Her mother was Vera Brittain, the early feminist, pacifist and author of the bestselling memoir of the First World War era, Testament of Youth, later made into a 2015 film. One of her grandmothers was a suffragette. During her early childhood she lived with her parents and older brother, John, in a house on the Thames at Cheyne Walk, Chelsea.

As children Shirley and John mixed with all their parents' guests, from cabinet ministers and international writers to members of local Labour parties and high ranking foreign visitors. Shirley's father was often away, working as a war correspondent in Spain and teaching at American universities. When there were no guests, her mother worked in her study and the children knew better than to interrupt her. She remembers her mother as disciplined, very punctual and very well dressed (unlike her as Shirley freely admits). Shirley was a confident and independent child, which was fortunate as the children were sent at the outbreak of

WW2 to live with family friends in Minnesota in the USA while their mother stayed behind. Shirley loved America, especially the outdoor life of the Midwest. She went to a co-educational school but was not too bothered about learning, preferring to think deep thoughts about the wider world.

At the end of the war Shirley boarded a ship home with another teenage English girls but they were caught up in a tremendous storm which nearly sunk them and they arrived in Portugal where they were interned for over four weeks as there were diplomatic problems and no Allied aircraft to fly them home. They were confined to a hotel in Lisbon but spent the time climbing up to the roof to share a bottle of wine. Shirley later described it in an interview as being a little like Lord of the Flies. On her return to England she was sent to board at St Pauls School which she hated. She describes herself as a "hellish adolescent". During the war her mother had been writing and publishing a pacifist newsletter that attacked Churchill and called the Allied air raids on German cities "atrocities". The newsletter provoked fury but her mother's bravery brought them closer. In later years when she left the Labour Party, she was conscious of the stand her mother had taken, although she never felt that what she went through was comparable.

At first, her mother was not keen on Shirley going into politics. However, she was encouraged by her father who was an absolute believer in equal opportunities for men and women. He was a converted Catholic with a radical view of the church's social responsibilities so it is not surprising that Shirley absorbed both belief systems. She has been a practising Catholic ever since and goes to church most Sundays, although she admits to be beset by doubt. At 16, the minimum age, she joined the Labour Party and became the Labour agent for Chelsea. This was the late 40s, and the party of Prime Minister Attlee and the new welfare state felt full of transforming possibilities. Shirley spoke at open-air meetings in Sloane Square, standing on orange boxes.

Despite her rebelliousness, she won a scholarship to Oxford. Even by their standards, she arrived as almost a fully formed public figure. According to Bill Rodgers, the Liberal Democrat peer, a political colleague and friend of hers ever since, she was a sort of star from the beginning. He was treasurer of the university Labour club; she was the first ever chairwoman. In his diary, Rodgers noted her "physical energy, friendliness and ambition". He describes her as being highly competitive and not wanting to miss anything. He said she always had far too many things on the go. Shirley agrees with this description - self-criticism being another appealing political trait of hers. In an interview she said, "I know my own weakness. My weakness is my strength. If you have unlimited energy, you take on too much." In her SDP days, some of her colleagues came up with an anagram for her name: "I whirl aimlessly".

After Oxford, Shirley studied the role of trade unions in America at Columbia University in New York, worked for Adlai Stevenson's presidential campaign, the Daily Mirror and the Financial Times, stood three times for Parliament, each time

unsuccessfully, taught in Ghana, and ended up, in 1960, as the successor to Rodgers as general secretary of the Fabian Society. At that time the Fabian Society was one of Labour's foremost sources of ideas and talent, tackling subjects too hot for the Labour party to handle and it was here that the wider political world took notice of Shirley. The new Labour leader Harold Wilson had been a Fabian himself and was, by the standards of British politics then, a keen promoter of women. After Shirley finally won a parliamentary seat in 1964, when the party returned to power, her ascent was spectacularly fast. She was appointed private secretary to the Minister of Health the same year, and by 1967 was a minister herself, first in Education and then the Home Office. Her voice, her air of informal confidence, her modern unfussy appearance, and above all her ease with different audiences made her a media and electoral asset for the increasingly embattled Labour government. As Minister for Education and Science, Williams launched the first Women in Engineering Year in 1969. Between 1971 and 1973, she served as Shadow Home Secretary.

In 1955 she had married an equally charismatic postwar figure, the philosopher Bernard Williams. In 1966 the Sunday Times described them as "the New Left at its most able, most generous, and sometimes most eccentric". The couple shared a big London house with friends from university, entertained refugees from Eastern Europe and politicians from Africa. In 1961, they had a daughter, Becky.

When Wilson formed his second administration in 1974, Shirley's first cabinet position was as Secretary of State for Prices and Consumer Protection, a post created by Wilson to help keep inflation down. However, during her time in office from 1974 to 1976, despite praise from the papers as "the shoppers' champion", inflation in Britain reached its highest ever annual level. Despite this, in 1976 she was promoted to Secretary of State for Education and Science, which was seen as a terrible department, run by second rate people and without real power. She is best remembered for her efforts to extend the comprehensive school system. Shortly afterwards, Barbara Castle, the cabinet's other prominent female member, remarked in her diaries that Wilson was "singling out Shirley for special and repeated praise". Newspaper stories increasingly started talking about her becoming prime minister. "There are shrewd judges who believe that she has a prime minister's baton in her briefcase," wrote the Sunday Times in 1967. "She is one of us," said the Sun in 1974, selecting her as its Woman of the Year and the "most likely" person to become Britain's first female prime minister. In 1981, even after Margaret Thatcher had beaten her to it, a Times leader suggested that she would be better suited to the task. She was excited that people were saying it, but never took it very seriously. She said she knew it wasn't going to happen and that she didn't think she'd have made a terribly good prime minister. It was becoming apparent by the 70s that she lacked certain political qualities. As a minister, she made a strong advocate for her departments but a less fluent administrator. Civil servants appreciated her quickness of mind, yet she had a certain reputation for indecision. She could see all the options too clearly. In the mid-to-late 70s Britain,

with economic and political crises occurring at a rate unseen for half a century, there was little time for ministerial pondering.

Critics of comprehensive schools - for whom Shirley remains an adversary to this day - were gaining momentum. Finally, to make it all worse, her marriage to Bernard had collapsed. They had separated in 1971, but it took her three years to agree to a divorce, and several more to come to terms with what had happened. She admits that she was terribly upset about the divorce and went through a long self-examination. Bringing up Becky as a single parent much of the time was not always compatible with maintaining a rising trajectory in the cabinet. Other ministers such as Denis Healey, Tony Crosland and Michael Foot got less good press than her but were better at the more private business of making alliances with MPs and dominating meetings. To compound this, an unspoken sexism kept her from being included in Wilson and Callaghan's innermost circle. As other female politicians have discovered since, always being called "wonderful" or by your first name can be a sign of not being taken seriously.

In 1979, Labour lost power and more surprisingly, Shirley lost her seat. However, she seemed less upset than her supporters in the media. She had other potential careers and within months, she was teaching politics at Harvard, trying television interviewing, and working at the British think-tank, the Policy Studies Institute. Like her parents, she seemed as comfortable being a political observer as a participant.

She had grown disillusioned with Labour. Roy Jenkins and Bill Rodgers, other Labour Party members who, like her, were liberal on social issues, pro-European, and alarmed at the strengthening influence on Labour of the unions and the anti-European left, had been edging towards setting up a breakaway party since the mid-70s. At first, Shirley was sympathetic but reluctant to join in as she retained an attachment to socialism. Most of the SDP's early members envisaged a party of the centre. However, 1981, she finally agreed to become one of the 'Gang of Four' rebels just before the SDP's official unveiling. Within weeks of the launch, the alliance it formed with the Liberals was ahead of both Labour and the Conservatives in the polls. In November 1981, Williams fought a by-election in Crosby, a prosperous suburb outside Liverpool and won comfortably, turning a Conservative majority of 19,272 into a SDP majority of 5,289. "At that moment we really did think we were carrying everything before us," says Rodgers. "I wanted, I think, to be chancellor. Shirley wanted to be foreign secretary."

For decades, general elections had been becoming more volatile. Michael Foot for Labour and Margaret Thatcher for the Conservatives were particularly unpopular leaders. Shirley felt the SDP's sort of politics - approachable, intelligent, and apparently lacking in divisive class connotations - seemed better suited to modern Britain. Unfortunately, this favourable climate did not last. In 1982, Argentina invaded the Falklands, the British recession began to soften, and the advance of the Labour left began to slow.

In the spring Shirley told an audience of journalists and politicians in America that the SDP's support was "frothy". In the autumn, she became the SDP president and then had to watch and take part in the party's unravelling during the rest of the 80s. Because she was president she had to hold things together while the SDP split over personalities and strategy and ideology. An early supporter of the Alliance with the Liberal Party, she was increasingly at odds with David Owen's leadership who wanted a more rightwing party than she did and their relationship became one of open hostility after the 1987 general election and the moves towards merger of the SDP and Liberals, which she enthusiastically supported.

In 1983, she lost Crosby at the general election. She blamed the changes to the constituency boundaries that she felt were politically motivated, saying that it was the only time in her life that she'd ever felt bitter about being cheated.

She contested Cambridge at the 1987 general election, but like Crosby and Hitchin, it was the sort of well-off constituency that she was suited to contesting but which was often going to vote Conservative anyway. She lost narrowly. At 56 and still younger than many government ministers, her political career seemed over.

However, that verdict was premature. Since 1988, she has been a Professor of Elective Politics at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, and a visiting academic, activist and informal ambassador from Ukraine to Brazil to China. She has remained a loud voice in the media. She assisted with the SDP's successful transformation into the Liberal Democrats. She did not stop teaching full-time at Harvard until 2001. In 1987, Shirley married the co-founder of the school, the prominent American political scientist Richard Neustadt. At their home in Cape Cod, they entertained guests in the generous, slightly disorganized manner of her Chelsea period. Neustadt died in 2003, but her travelling has not abated.

Of her political career it has been said that Shirley and the SDP effectively created New Labour, by forcing the Labour party to change although it is felt that the transformation would have happened anyway, and more quickly, if she and the others had stayed and fought from within. It is felt that her importance is as a politely iconoclastic female politician, an exemplary liberal internationalist, a rare practitioner of a franker, more thoughtful kind of politics.

The Labour Party which she abandoned for being too leftwing she now criticizes for becoming too favourable to the free market. From the late 60s until the early 80s newspapers kept saying that she was an unusual, even unique political presence: a thinker but also a vivid communicator; a pioneering female cabinet minister; a middle-class liberal who appealed to the tabloid reader; a highly popular member of often highly unpopular Labour governments; and finally, a co-founder of an unprecedentedly successful new party at that time, the SDP.

Shirley did not become prime minister. Yet in less conventional ways her reputation has endured and more. "She's one of those few politicians who have

seemed to grow," says the feminist and writer Susie Orbach. "My ears perk up when she's on the radio. She has a consistency that doesn't sound tired. As the whole political tenor has moved to the right, her liberalism has become more and more interesting."

The former Labour MP and Minister Clare Short called Shirley "a really wonderful role model. Her pure persistence and intelligence and reasonableness ... I get comments from people round the country: 'I hope you like Shirley Williams. I think she's wonderful.' In the Labour party, a lot of the hostility which persisted for Roy Jenkins just dissolved for Shirley."

In 1993 she was made Baroness Williams of Crosby, but when former colleagues talk about her she is almost always "Shirley", just as "wonderful" is the first adjective they reach for.

She was awarded the Right Honourable Baroness in Hertfordshire before being awarded the Member of the Companion of Honour in the 2017 Queen's New Year's Honours List for her services to political and public life.

"In an age of soundbites, cynicism and ideology-free politics, Shirley Williams remains an idealist in supporting democracy, equality and freedom, and has promoted these virtues in the new democracies of Eastern Europe and southern Africa. She has a phenomenal energy and a huge enthusiasm for discussing the big issues of politics. This love of politics and the warmth of her personality communicates itself to everyone Williams meets. It explains the tremendous affection in which she is held." (quote by Lord Newby, National Secretary to the SDP, 1983 –