

Leading Ladies

By Nancy Honey

Interviews by Hattie Garlick

Baroness Shirley Williams: *British politician and academic, founder of the Social Democratic Party*

1930: Born in London

1960: Appointed Fabian Society general secretary

1964: Became Labour MP for Hitchin/Stevenage

1967: Appointed Minister for Education and Science

1969: Appointed Minister of State for Northern Ireland

1974: Made Secretary of State for Prices and Consumer Protection

1976: Made Secretary of State for Education

1979: Lost her seat

1981: Jointly founded the Social Democratic Party [SDP] as part of the 'Gang of Four'

1981: Published *Politics is for People*

1982: Became SDP president

1985: Published *A Job to Live*

1988: Appointed Professor of elective politics, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University

1993: Created Baroness Williams of Crosby

2001: Became Liberal Democrat Leader in the House of Lords

2003: Published *God and Caesar*

My mother was a feminist and she instilled that in me, too. But it wasn't just her influence I felt. My father's mother had been a strong suffragist. Her husband, my grandfather, was a vicar in the Church of England and, rather like some of today's vicars, he was not an enthusiast for feminism.

She was a good deal younger than him and she became very involved in the branch of the suffrage movement that was led by Millicent Fawcett. The other branch, led by Mrs. Pankhurst, was regarded as rather shocking. They attacked property and so on. Probably, for a vicar's wife, it would have been very difficult to be seen to be supporting that.

It put a great strain on their marriage and in the end they separated because he couldn't accept her interests and activity in that field.

She died quite young and my father, who was devoted to his mother, took up the cause and became a strong supporter of feminism.

Between my own parents, feminism caused no strain at all, they were completely at one over it. They shared a very strong sense of the equality of men and women and of the importance of equal opportunities for both.

So, unlike my mother's father, who was opposed to her going to university, my father from the beginning always treated me exactly equally to my brother.

I simply took it for granted. Until I became a teenager, I never encountered anything that made me feel that girls were inferior to boys.

When I was nine or ten, my parents were both placed on the Gestapo black list. It meant that they would be killed immediately if there was a Nazi invasion of Britain.

They were on the list because they had consistently supported bringing Jewish refugees to Britain and they had both lectured in Germany against Hitler during his rise to power. And then, too, there was my mother's book, *Testament of Youth* – a book that ran completely contrary to the Nazi philosophy that war was a glorifying and ennobling thing.

Of course, the Nazis also believed that married women should not work; they were there to have babies. So on every score, the Nazis disliked my parents very much.

There weren't a great many people on the black list. It was ordered alphabetically. My mother was Brittain and my father was Catlin, so they were both on the same page as Winston Churchill. So when the newspapers printed the blacklist in 1945, and all wanted to picture Churchill's name, they had to include my parents, too. Which was rather interesting because my mother was not exactly loved by the government of the day.

They decided to stay in the UK, they were that sort of people. There was a wide expectancy in 1940 that there would be a German invasion fairly soon and so, to their eyes, we would almost certainly be orphaned. We were evacuated, instead, to America.

In America, I almost became a movie star. The news went out that a big picture was looking for a young actress and every region of the country was invited to put up a name: the requirements were that they should speak 'English English,' be blonde, be good riders and have a little experience of acting. So on that basis I was put up to represent the Midwest. Elizabeth Taylor was put up from California, and several other girls from other parts of the country.

We had screen tests and I was narrowly beaten by Elizabeth Taylor. There was, of course, an important difference between us: her mother was there with her, battling and lobbying for her, and my mother was back at home in England. So I didn't have quite the same advantages.

But thank God I didn't get it. I don't think I could ever have made a life as a movie star – an actress, maybe. I did a lot of acting later when I was at Oxford University and toured America with them. But acting in classic plays is a mile away from being the 'girl next door' in a Hollywood movie.

Was politics the career I was always 'destined' for, as opposed to acting? I think if one's character is inclined towards being tremendously involved and energetic, which mine is, then whatever career you end up doing will reflect that. Whether you become an astronomer or an actress, an engineer or a politician – you're going to throw yourself into it.

Inevitably, though, I think my sense of self has become quite bound up in my work. Whatever people do, it's bound to impact on their impression of themselves.

Though I have sometimes been quite angry with popular attitudes, I have a lot of respect for the British public. It's not easily manipulated, it's not easily catapulted into hysteria, like the American Republicans or the German left-wing. It's a more rooted, steady, sceptical audience and it's pretty sharp.

I've also learnt that politicians, especially male ones, tend to overestimate their own capacities, and so I am careful not to overestimate mine. I think I have a fairly modest view of myself.

Politicians, like actors, tend to have relatively short public lives unless they are Prime Ministers or something like that. Very few people remember, now, who was the Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1850.

My mother, on the other hand, became semi-immortal as an author. Her book went on being read and talked about, decade after decade, even long after she had died. It was relevant, you see, not just to one generation but as part of the wider human story.

I am under no illusion that I am going to be immortal! Though I've written some books, they are not in the immortal class.

I was tipped, at one stage, to be the first female Prime Minister. But there were then, and still are, so few women in politics that if you were quite good at your job and were a good speaker, you were almost inevitably going to be tipped for the job. There are at least three women MPs who are currently being spoken of in that way. It's always been like that.

I suppose I was in the group from which one might have recruited a female Prime Minister. But of course, there only ever was one, Mrs. Thatcher. And she was chosen as leader partly by misunderstanding.

A lot of men voted for Thatcher as a way of slapping Ted Heath across the face, without thinking for a moment that she would actually win. They were so angry with Heath that they wanted to really shake him. They were persuaded that the way to do so was to give a very substantial, but not a winning, vote to Mrs. Thatcher.

There was a great shock when she became leader. There was amazement.

I don't think that devalues her victory as a feminist milestone. That's just the way of the world. Thatcher is probably not the greatest or most intelligent woman ever to have served in politics. But she is certainly the most single minded and determined and credit must be given to her for that.

She also never played games in politics. Look at virtually any debate in the House of Commons and you will see a lot of men playing games, essentially playing football terrace games during Prime Minister's Questions in a way that I find terribly irritating. Jumping up and down, shrieking...

The funny thing is that women are always charged with getting emotional, but when it comes to politics, they tend to be much more serious than men. It's very rare to see women taking part in those games. Mostly they don't like it, and they worry about the real issues that have to be confronted, rather than getting all excited and emotional in the face of them.

It's 'old boys club' on the right and 'old mates' on the left wing, but either way, it's a system of game playing that excludes women from the start. Both sides love to get away to all male environments. In the case of the Tories, they retreat to clubs given half the chance. In the case of Labour, mostly pubs. In both cases, women feel slightly uncomfortable in those situations.

Mrs. T was a very good example of that seriousness. I don't think she was strong on humour, though her husband was. Most women politicians are not very strong on humour, in fact. It's one of their real drawbacks.

Women, you see, are far less secure than men in their professional roles, whether they are businesswomen or politicians. Wherever you find women doing jobs that have been thought of, traditionally, as 'men's jobs,' you don't find a lot of humour because their path to the top has not been funny.

I was lucky, because I had this colossal privilege of having both my parents strongly supportive of my career. Lots of women can claim their mother but many, of my generation, can't claim their father in that way.

Secondly, I went to two all-girls secondary schools. There, there was always a position of leadership that could be filled by a woman. In co-ed schools, these opportunities are mostly seized by boys. Not because they win the elections, but because they are often the only candidates.

Young women, as they reach adolescence, tend to give way to boys. Even though they might be brighter and cleverer, they are still deeply instilled in the idea that boys should take the lead.

It's been my experience throughout my life, and it's still my experience today, that when I address an event, the ratio of men to women asking questions is broadly about three to one. It hasn't changed at all during my lifetime. The only exceptions are literary festivals.

It's an overwhelming argument for the value of single-sex education in instilling confidence in young women. And that's the key question.

I've been in politics for a pretty long time, so I've lost some and gained some. I have a fairly realistic attitude about it.

I don't think it's thick skin you require in politics. You show the world a thick skin, yes, but every time I knew that I was going to have to take a stand that was going to be unpopular, it wasn't an easy decision to make. And there were several of them. There was the '75 referendum on Europe, there was the 1971 decision to vote against the three line whip by Labour, there were battles in the Labour party with the militant left, the most recent battles on Europe... I don't think they're fun.

Each time, I thought, *Oh God, do I have to do this?* And each time, the ghosts of my parents said, "Yes." That was what it really was.

I think it is probably difficult for a marriage to accommodate two big ambitions. And if you are in a position where you are living in two different places, as my first husband and I were at one stage, then that's certainly not helpful.

Communal living, on the other hand, is lovely. We could never understand why more didn't try it. When we were married, Bernard and I found that very big Victorian houses were quite hard to sell. So they were a great deal better value, in terms of space, than a little terraced house would have been.

We decided we would share a house with two great friends of ours – Hilary Rubinstein, the outstanding literary agent, and his wife, Helge. We had the second floor and Hilary and Helge had the first floor. Then, we rented the top floor to the Windsors – the television actor Frank and his wife.

We all had our separate accommodation and privacy, but the children were all together; their childhoods were completely shared. So we had this marvellous outcome whereby only one person had to babysit, the other two couples could go out or to work. Between the whole lot of us there was always someone at home when the kids came back from school.

Every now and then we would share our friends, too. The Rubinsteins' friends were mostly literary, and our friends were mostly politicians and sometimes philosophers... The academics, politicians and writers all loved meeting one another, so our social scene was varied and rich and rather exciting.

People raise their eyebrows in this country and think you must be having shared love affairs if you share a space, but it's not true at all. Once you get into that, it's going to break up fairly soon.

I deeply believe that men and women can be very close friends indeed without sex coming into it. On that basis, sharing your lives together, provided there's trust, is a wonderful way to live.