

The History Boys

The Journal of Liberal History and the Liberal Democrat History Group are organising an interesting little exercise which will culminate at a fringe meeting at Party Conference in September. Readers are asked to vote for the Greatest British Liberal. The ballot paper helpfully starts you off with fifteen names ranging from Asquith to Roy Jenkins, Charles James Fox to Gladstone, Locke to Mill. There is even, for fans of Lembit Opik and Tony Greaves, space for write-in candidates. Although you may find that Tony and Lembit are disqualified on the entirely spurious ground that nominees have to be dead. It is one of those irresistible exercises like those programmes on Channel Four which go through the hundred best whatever which you join at number fifty four and find yourself still viewing three hours later to find out the winner.

The exercise also has a more serious side. I always suspect politicians who have no sense of history. In a way your political heroes are a very good guide to where you yourself sit in the political spectrum.

Although entirely happy in my skin as a Liberal Democrat I suppose I still think of myself as a Social Democrat. The paradox is that, as I ponder my vote for the Greatest British Liberal, my pen hovers over two names which best define my concept of social democracy. No, one of them is not Roy Jenkins. I greatly admired Roy; but at no time in my political life did I consider myself a Jenkinsite.

The two who head my list are William Beveridge and John Maynard Keynes. I suppose I give them hero status

because both believed that politicians could make a difference and that we were not simply at the mercy of hidden hands or globalisation or the hundred and one reasons that have often give for not helping the have nots. In the Twentieth Century totalitarianism was defeated partly by force of arms and partly because the democracies were able to take control of their own destinies by social and economic policies inspired by Beveridge and Keynes. They are my heroes because they showed that politics is not just a spectator sport. It is about doing things and changing things. They showed that market forces do not put things beyond our control or that the market is always right. That is why I believe in protecting our public service broadcasting and willingly distorting the market in favour of our public service standard setter, the BBC. That is why I want us to use the upcoming Housing Bills to argue for a massive increase in public sector housing whilst protecting the greenbelt from the ravages of “free market” developers. For the same reason I do not accept “trickle down” economics – a theory which allows the rich to keep their wealth whilst assuaging any guilt they may have by claiming that any attempt to tax them fairly will stultify their entrepreneurial spirit. I welcome our new tax package as a conscious intervention in favour of both social justice and environmental protection.

My Europeanism is, in part, because I believe social Europe has greater long-term viability than a Reagan/Thatcher inspired “Anglo-Saxon” model which tolerates greater and greater disparities of wealth. Of course not all that Beveridge and Keynes thought or argued for is transferable to our age. However their central themes, which married a belief in individual freedom with a

concept of society which guaranteed all its citizens a certain quality of life, must continue to be the bed rock of our party.

My pen wavers over my ballot as I remember the old newsread footage of Beveridge announcing his plan. Gaunt, austere and in a clipped, upper class accent he told a war weary Britain that Government was about waging war on poverty, ignorance and disease. It gave the generation who had fought the war a sense of purpose. For the generation which came after my generation, it gave the benefits of a more cohesive and socially just society. The liberalism of Beveridge and Keynes still has its place in the twenty first century as we look at the challenges of fair trade, climate change and large scale economic migration. I certainly hope both my history boys will be in the grand final when we meet in Brighton in September.