

CHOICE WORDS

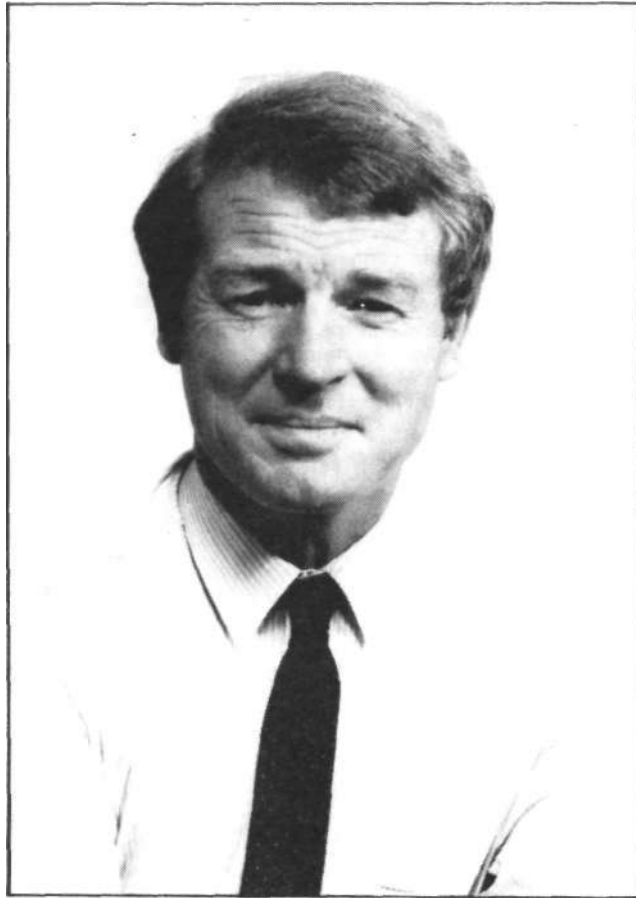
Paddy's Patter

Leader of the SLD, Paddy Ashdown, talks to Chris Granlund about his life and his reading habits

My first memory of being told stories, was with our Indian *ayah*, it was real colonial stuff. She used to tell me stories in Hindustani as there weren't too many books around. I also recall my father sitting and reading to us at bedtime back in Ireland when I was six or seven. There were seven of us at one stage and I was the eldest. He read Kipling, it sounds like real jingoistic stuff but he was a very progressive man. He was a colonel in the army in India part of a line of generation after generation of senior officers. Somehow or other he preserved a very strong sense of nonconformity, he was the great arguer in the family. My mother was one of those women who made life happen by living in the practical world and giving everybody around her so much love. She almost killed herself by trying to love too many people too much. They were a strong influence on my life although I saw them for very little time, maybe for a total of two years before I was 19 when they emigrated to Australia.

I first went to the local school in Donegal, County Down, when I was five, going on to the private education system in Northern Ireland when I was seven which continued until I was 18. I don't remember the process of learning to read. I never remember how I learn things but I always remember what use I've put them to.

I was very attached to Beatrix Potter's *Jeremy Fisher*. I enjoyed those stories again with our kids. I've always been a fan of CS Lewis, one of the seminal books I read was *On The Problem Of Pain* which is absolutely fascinating on the



question of how on earth there can be a God if there is so much pain in the world.

Until the age of 16, I was bored by school. It always seemed to me to be a pedestrian place, inflexible and rigid. Then I came in contact with two teachers who simply set me on fire. The opening up of English literature, especially Shakespeare and the metaphysical poets, was sparked off by these two men. I won a scholarship which paid for my school fees on the understanding that I would go into the navy. I don't regret that but by the time I was preparing for my A levels I was hooked on learning and I remember being very sad when my last school reports said that I really ought to go to university. I did go into the navy but eventually I did an interpretership in Hong Kong in 1967-70 and I developed a love of the Chinese language and literature.

I was struck by the wealth of this culture and the political importance of art was a

revelation. Art and literature are the things that give the disparate group of people we call the Chinese nation a sense of national cohesion. My habit of lateral thinking and awareness of the importance of the environment and the holistic approach come from my Chinese experience; taking a long-term view of things, recognising the importance of the quality of life. Going back to be a student at 27 has given me a profound conviction that what we need in Britain more than anything else is a decent adult education system.

My belief in equality of opportunity comes from my time in the services when I was asked, by accident of birth, to command people who, by any measure, were better than I was and to some of whom I owe my life. I often think of the extraordinary society we would have if we gave them all the chances they need. I cast a vote for Labour in every election up until 1967. It

wasn't until 1970 that I discovered this funny, furry little animal, the Liberal Party, an almost endangered species in the corner of British politics. I discovered that I had really been a Liberal all of my life with my beliefs in the individual, equality of opportunity and a non-corporate, non-collectivist view of society.

I have a reading file which is never empty so I read all the time, it is the most crushing job. Devastating. I have not read a novel, or anything apart from the papers that are put in front of me for at least a year. My contact with ordinary people is drastically reduced - you just don't get that in parliament. I dislike the style of the house. The political machinery in this country destroys your personal life and gives you heart attacks. And it doesn't even govern effectively. I rarely get to read a newspaper although I do read a digest of the news that's prepared for me. I keep on making resolutions to find the time to keep myself fitter and to read more but it never seems to work out.

One of the most hopeful signs in society today is that those people whose attitudes and politics were shaped in the 60s are now coming to be leaders of our society. There's a fascinating report, *The Taylor Nelson Monitor*, which concludes that Britain is divided into three groups; one group consists of the children of the industrial revolution, traditional Labour supporters, and it is in decline. The second group are the yuppies who follow the philosophy that more is better, those who have gained most from the Thatcher revolution. The third group is more interested in the quality of life, they have a holistic approach, a concern for the environment. This group is about one third of the total and is growing. It is predicted that it will be the dominant group in Western politics by the mid-1990s. These are the children of the 60s. They are the vote that we have to go for.