

# A life thrice blessed

## Feature story

Last Wednesday evening MPs and peers gathered in Speaker's House to present *The House Magazine's* Lifetime Achievement award to Lord Healey, who paid tribute in turn to Edna, his wife of 63 years

**L**ord Healey was presented with *The House Magazine's* Lifetime Achievement award at a special presentation in Speaker's House last Wednesday.

Lord Healey's wife Edna accompanied him to the special event, along with their daughters and granddaughters. Lord Howe of Aberavon, who presented the award, and his wife Baroness Howe of Idlicote, also attended, while a room full of MPs and peers gathered to pay tribute, amongst them former Commons Speaker Baroness Boothroyd, former foreign secretary Margaret Beckett, former defence secretaries Lord King of Bridgwater, Lord Robertson of Port Ellen and Geoff Hoon, and Sir Malcolm Rifkind who has served as both defence and foreign secretary.

The evening was hosted by the Speaker, John Bercow, who described Lord Healey, 92, as "one of the outstanding figures of post-war politics". "I think most people gathered here would say that Denis Healey is an intellectual, a bibliophile, a statesman and a distinguished soldier." Addressing Lord Healey directly, the Speaker continued: "Ranging from opera to painting and literature and photography, you are someone who is the living embodiment of that varied hinterland. In short, you are a great man and we're thrilled to have you here today."

Sir Patrick Cormack, *The House Magazine's* life president, praised Lord Healey for being "a great parliamentarian, a statesman, and a man of breadth and vision", before introducing Lord Howe, saying: "We can think of no-one better to present this award than his old friend and sparring partner, Geoffrey Howe."

Lord Howe, who succeeded Healey as chancellor following the 1979



general election, reflected on their longstanding friendship: "We were introduced to the House of Lords on the same day, and we both married our wives in the same church," he revealed.

Accepting the award Lord Healey, who was in fine form as he greeted and chatted with guests, friends and colleagues, began by saying: "I have enjoyed my life in politics enormously. Although politics is about power rather than love, it is a necessary profession, because if you want to stop wars then you have got to go into politics,

because wars are made by governments and not anyone else."

However, Lord Healey added that he had, on the whole, preferred his retirement, "because I have so much more time to spend on my real loves, which are the arts, my love of my family and their love for me".

He ended by paying tribute to Edna, his wife of 63 years: "I have been happy all my life, not least, of course, because of a very, very happy marriage," Lord Healey began.

"When Maggie Thatcher was PM she said that 'every prime minister needs a Willie'. In my lifetime I have always had four: Shakespeare, Blake, Wordsworth and Yeats. They have given me more pleasure than anybody in politics, and I would like to finish with a few words written by Shakespeare about Edna, three centuries before she was born."

Lord Healey then recited Shakespeare's Sonnet 18, with Edna, his family, and parliamentary friends looking on. There was barely a dry eye in Speaker's House as a most memorable evening drew to a close. ●



Following the presentation of the award, Lord Healey shared his political reflections with *House Magazine* editor Gisela Stuart

### Lord Healey on MPs and defence policy

The big difference is that my generation had nearly all been fighting in the Second World War. We understood about power, and the importance of independence and planning. This generation doesn't have that background, which is a great disadvantage.

### On bombs

I thought the Americans had been a total disaster in Vietnam, and I saw that bombing makes enemies much more than it kills them. So I wouldn't allow the Royal Air Force to drop a single bomb. They often wanted to in Borneo.

### On Trident

I'm against replacing Trident. I understand very well why it's being done, but I think it's a waste of money. The world has changed so much. The only nuclear threat to us is a bomb hidden by terrorists in a boat in a harbour, like London or Liverpool, and Trident is absolutely irrelevant to that. Fortunately Churchill was right: the existence of nuclear weapons has made a third world war impossible. However, it's still possible for terrorists to use nuclear bombs – thank God they haven't yet – and the Russians have been so careless about who gets hold of their own weapons. Some have been stolen – we just don't know what has happened to them.

### On the Berlin Wall

I went to Berlin the weekend it came down. It was fascinating. For the first time I was able to cross over Checkpoint Charlie. I knew very well that we could make friends with many people in East Germany.

### On the International Monetary Fund (IMF)

I didn't need to go to the IMF, because the figures in the Public Sector Borrowing Requirement were howlingly wrong by billions of pounds. I wish I'd known that, because I'd never have gone. As it happens, I only spent half the money and paid it all back before the period was over.

*Clockwise from top left: Denis and Edna with Geoffrey and Elspeth Howe; Lord Healey being interviewed by Gisela Stuart; Edna wipes away a tear following Denis' emotional speech; Lord Healey receives his Lifetime Achievement award from Lord Howe as Speaker John Bercow and House Magazine editor Gisela Stuart look on*



### On economic figures today

I think the figures are less reliable now. Globalisation means that billions of pounds can move from Hong Kong, to Buenos Aires and back to here in microseconds. It's much more difficult to control money.

### On having regrets

I do now. I didn't at the time. The one thing I regretted when I was involved in politics was not being foreign secretary, although when I was defence secretary of course, I was effectively foreign secretary when we were getting out of Eastern Suez. A friend of mine who was in the Foreign Office said that half the Foreign Office thought I should be foreign secretary, and the other half thought I was.

### On if he had been foreign secretary

Maybe I could have stopped the Vietnam war, or maybe the war in Vietnam would have happened anyway, but the domino theory that it would lead to wars everywhere was balls. Harold Wilson was quite right to keep us out

of Vietnam, but he didn't oppose the war publicly. I would have done that.

### On today's MPs

The real problem compared with my time is that then, you were very badly paid and had to do something else. The Tories mainly worked in business and banking, whereas Labour MPs were largely journalists, as I was. Once politics becomes a career then you tend to lose any sense of values entirely. That's my impression these days.

### On class

In my time, the class war was a real thing. People in the working class looked and behaved totally differently to the middle class or the top hats of the upper class. Now everybody is in the same class. Ask a youngster now what you think about the class war, and they would think it was something at school. I don't think the class war is a good thing at all.

### On Margaret Thatcher

Once you turn 80, all your enemies become your friends. I actually gave Margaret Thatcher a hug when I met her recently.

### On Geoffrey Howe

I said being attacked by Geoffrey was like being savaged by a dead sheep. When I congratulated him on being foreign secretary, he said it was like being nuzzled by an Old Ram. ●