



## Jo Swinson: the new Liberal Democrat Leader

22 July 2019

## Who is Jo Swinson?

Jo Swinson was born in 1980, growing up and going to school in East Dunbartonshire, which she now represents in Parliament. Her mother was a primary school teacher while her father worked in economic development. She cites her earliest political experience as signing petitions against animal testing in the Body Shop.

A Liberal Democrat supporter since she was at school, Jo joined the Liberal Democrats aged 17, while studying Management at the LSE. During her time at university, she worked as a Research Assistant for the Employers' Forum on Disability.

After graduating, Swinson moved to Hull, working as Viking FM's Marketing & PR Manager. Aged 21, she stood against John Prescott at the 2001 general election in Hull East. Relocating back to Scotland, she worked as Marketing Manager for SpaceandPeople Plc and then as Communications Officer for the UK Public Health Association prior to her election as an MP.

In 2011, she married Duncan Hames, who was the Liberal Democrat MP for Chippenham from 2010 to 2015, and is now an anti-corruption campaigner. The couple have two sons.

## What is Jo Swinson's political background?

Swinson was successfully elected to Parliament in 2005, winning East Dunbartonshire from Labour. In the Commons, she became a Lib Dem whip and spokesperson for culture, media and sport, before being promoted to Shadow Secretary of State for Scotland in 2006. Swinson gained additional responsibility in 2007 becoming Shadow Women and Equality Minister. She returned to the backbenches later that year, before becoming Shadow Minister for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs in 2008, retaining this role until the 2010 election.

From 2007 to 2010, Swinson also sat on the Environmental Audit Committee. She campaigned against excessive food packaging, introducing a private members' bill to reduce this, and produced annual reports on Easter Egg packaging. She also founded the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Wellbeing Economics.

In November 2010, Swinson joined the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition Government as Parliamentary Private Secretary to Vince Cable (Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills) and then to Nick Clegg (Deputy Prime Minister),

being promoted to serve as both Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Employment Relations, Consumer and Postal Affairs and as Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Women and Equalities from 2012 until the 2015 election. Swinson took maternity leave during this time and cites her main achievements as a minister shared parental leave, gender pay gap reporting, action against payday lenders and employers who don't pay the minimum wage, new rights for online consumers and improvements to corporate reporting. However, she has been criticised over employment tribunal fees introduced by the coalition.

Swinson lost her seat to the SNP's John Nicholson in the 2015 election, which saw her party nearly wiped-out, and subsequently established Equal Power Consulting, which worked with organisations to deliver changes to 'enable both women and men to thrive'. Swinson authored *Equal Power: And How You Can Make It Happen*, which reviewed the current state of gender equality and suggested actions readers could take to improve the situation. It was shortlisted for the best non-fiction by a parliamentarian award at the 2018 Parliamentary Book Awards.

During her time out of Parliament, Swinson also served as the Chair of Maternity Action, a member of the Advertising Standards Authority's Advertising Advisory Committee, Chair of CIPD's Policy Forum, Vice-Chair of Compare the Market's Institute of Inertia and Non-Executive Director of retail technology firm Clear Returns.

Swinson stood again in East Dunbartonshire when Theresa May called the June 2017 snap election, regaining the seat from the SNP with a majority of 5,339. After her re-election, she was made the Lib Dem spokesperson on foreign and commonwealth affairs, a role which she has retained under new leader Sir Vince Cable. When Tim Farron announced his resignation as Lib Dem leader, Swinson said that she wouldn't stand to replace him despite being 'overwhelmed' by messages calling on her to do so, arguing that while 'most blokes in my shoes would run for leader like a shot', 'just because a man would do it, doesn't make it the right thing to do'. Instead, she was elected unopposed as deputy leader.

In 2018, while she was on maternity leave following the birth of her second son, Conservative chairman Brandon Lewis broke a pairing agreement on a Brexit vote, voting with the Government instead of abstaining. Swinson accused the Government of 'calculated, deliberate breaking of trust' but Lewis claimed it was an 'honest mistake'. She has supported the current trial of proxy voting for MPs on maternity or miscarriage leave, suggesting that it be extended to bereaved or seriously ill MPs. Swinson became the first MP to bring a baby into a Commons debate.

Swinson was one of just two candidates in the 2019 leadership election caused by the resignation of Sir Vince Cable, beating Ed Davey by 47,997 votes (63%) to 28,021 (37%), on a turnout of 72%.

## What does Jo Swinson stand for?

Swinson has structured her campaign for the Lib Dem leadership around three key issues:

### 1. 'Building an economy that puts people and the planet first'

Building on her longstanding support for wellbeing economics, Swinson used her leadership campaign to call for a 'transformed economy' which rewards companies who focus on 'long-term challenges' such as climate change and inequality by measuring 'the right things', tying in with her leadership rival Ed Davey's call to 'decarbonise capitalism'.

### 2. 'Harnessing the technological revolution for Britain's future'

Swinson elaborated on her thoughts on this topic during her speech to the party's autumn conference in 2018, claiming that the 'social contract' was 'broken', citing problems with benefits, low wages, housing and healthcare which are leaving 'so many' behind, while they 'see the wealthy and the privileged enjoying far more than their fair share'. She warned that it could be further weakened by 'the fourth industrial revolution', with AI reflecting existing systemic biases through 'unaccountable algorithms' and technology turning humans into 'machines'. Instead, she called for society to be reconfigured and for technology to bring 'knowledge, information and power to the masses'. During the campaign she has suggested that benefits could include a shorter working week.

### 3. 'Rally a liberal movement to stand up for our values'

One of the main points of difference between Swinson and Davey has been their attitude towards working with others, particularly to oppose Brexit. Swinson has shown greater openness, for example embracing Change UK when it was first formed and working with the cross-party People's Vote campaign, while Davey has been more cautious and sceptical. This is perhaps a more challenging approach for the party faithful, but it is in keeping with Swinson's wider approach: she has been more open about mistakes made by the Lib Dems during coalition such as supporting increasing tuition fees, and has challenged the party over its lack of diversity (switching, for example, from opposing to supporting all women shortlists).

Both candidates were, however, united in ruling out a coalition or a confidence and supply arrangement with either Labour or the Conservatives under current circumstances, with Swinson telling *The Herald* that 'we need to stop Brexit and work with people who agree with us on that, and that's not the leadership of the Conservatives or the Labour Party'.

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