

MY HISTORY HERO

Leader of the Opposition Sir Keir Starmer chooses

Eleanor Roosevelt

1884–1962



Eleanor Roosevelt, the longest-serving First Lady of the US, working alongside her husband (and fifth cousin), Franklin D Roosevelt. "She tirelessly campaigned for equality," observes Sir Keir Starmer

IN PROFILE

Eleanor Roosevelt was First Lady of the US during her husband Franklin D Roosevelt's four terms in office between 1933 and 1945. A mother of six, she was also a diplomat and campaigner who served as the US delegate to the United Nations General Assembly from 1945 to 1952, playing a leading role in drawing up the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

// Understanding how universal values such as human dignity and respect can shape politics was central to her way of thinking //



Sir Keir Starmer has served as Leader of the Opposition, and of the Labour Party, since 2020. He has been the MP for Holborn and St Pancras since 2015. He was previously director of public prosecutions from 2008 to 2013.

When did you first hear about Eleanor Roosevelt? While studying law at Leeds University in the 1980s I became completely absorbed by the work of the United Nations in the years after the Second World War, when the world came to understand the horrors of the Nazi regime. Under the guidance of Eleanor Roosevelt, the UN announced a Universal Declaration of Human Rights to collectively ensure that countries were accountable to each other for abuses and rights. It was the first legal instrument of its kind.

What kind of woman was she? Born into a prominent and wealthy American family, she was a niece of President Theodore Roosevelt. She had a rather sad childhood, though: both of her parents died young and, perhaps as a result, she was a shy child. Throughout her life, however, she had an inner drive and a keen sense of social justice that grew as she became older.

What made her a hero? First and foremost, her understanding of the power of international global co-operation. Second, the compassion she showed for America's unemployed during the Great Depression of the 1930s when she was First Lady. Finally, her civil rights activism. She tirelessly campaigned for equality, particularly in relation to issues affecting black Americans.

What was her finest hour? Undoubtedly her pivotal role in getting the 50 original member states of the UN to adopt the Universal Declaration in the wake of the extermination of six million Jews, and many others, in the Holocaust. She described it as an "international Magna Carta", using a very British idea to introduce this document to the world, and its implementation became a personal moral cause for her. One of the most important threads running through the 'Declaration' was respect for human dignity – a value that has driven me all my life.

Can you see any parallels between her life and yours? Yes, in understanding how universal values such as human dignity and respect can shape politics, and how law and politics constantly intertwine. Both were central to her way of thinking, and have also been central to my mission to change the Labour Party and, when we get into government, to change the country.

What would you ask her if you could meet her? How she would ensure that the flames of human dignity and respect burn as brightly today – when, for instance, we have seen Russian forces display such barbarism in Ukraine – as they did in that intense period after the Second World War. **IT**

Sir Keir Starmer was talking to York Membery



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