

## What Have the Romans Vikings Ever Done For Us?: A 'Postcard' on How Studying Literature and Mythology Equips You for a Career in Politics

Fiona Twycross

In 1998, I headed down from Edinburgh to London to take up a career in politics. In my boxes, and through nine subsequent moves, my thesis entitled 'Ragnarok: Use of Norse Mythology in Contemporary Scandinavian Literature' has come with me.

For the interview I had for my first job with the Labour Party, I had a very carefully crafted answer as to how my degree was relevant to the role. Fortunately, I didn't have to use it and I honestly can't remember what it was. The chair of the interview panel opened by saying to roars of laughter from the rest of the panel that they had had great fun deciding over lunch how the subject was relevant. I decided to park my answer and laughed along with them. I got the job as a committee officer for the Parliamentary Labour Party.

The next decade saw me move up the ranks of the party organisation, working both in London and across the UK before I left to work for a charity. But politics was in my blood, and I was later fortunate enough to be elected to the London Assembly. More recently, I was appointed Deputy Mayor for Fire and Resilience by the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan.

Occasionally, in the almost quarter of a century since I graduated, I have been asked what I wrote my thesis about and how it is relevant to what I did next. At first glance there seems little connection. However, what I learned in the process of researching, writing, and defending my thesis, as the first PhD student within Edinburgh University's Scandinavian Studies department, has travelled with me. It has enriched both my life and my personal resilience as well as giving me deeper analytical skills that have stood me in good stead throughout.

## A few things I learned from my studies

### **1. What has happened helps you understand what will happen next**

In politics, knowing what others (friend or foe) are likely to do next is key. My ability to do this was honed by studying literature, particularly the study of motive. Being able to read the runes and predict possible next moves by friends and foes alike has proved very helpful as I have navigated politics.

### **2. Trust nobody (or at least very few people)**

Understanding alliances and how they shift is vital in Norse mythology and politics alike.

Loki isn't the only ambiguous character in the Norse myths, but his shift of allegiance from the gods to the giants is a standout betrayal. A political friend (whom I trust) once told me that he had three political friends he trusted but dozens of allies. Alliances are formed and shift depending on shared interests. I had absorbed this truth from the myths even before my first day working in politics.

### 3. Gods that die reflect the reality of political deities

Ragnarok – the twilight of the gods – reflects the reality of political deities. The majority of the most familiar mythological gods are immortal, but the Norse gods are not. With few exceptions, political gods are not immortal either. An incoming leader generally sees their popularity fall as they make mistakes or deal with the reality of governing by making unpopular decisions. Understanding this, and the frailty of leaders, human or otherwise, can only stand you in good stead as you navigate political waters.

### 4. There is no absolute truth, there is just interpretation

The use of ancient myths in a contemporary setting shows how language and story alike don't create an absolute truth but are open to interpretation. Norse mythology has been used in ugly ways to reinforce fascist beliefs in Aryan supremacy but also for good, to illustrate the need to avert environmental disaster.

Arguing at Mayor's Question Time in London's City Hall about the success or otherwise of his approach to the London Living Wage, both Boris Johnson as the then Mayor of London and myself as a Labour Assembly Member used the same set of statistics to make opposing points.

There is seldom an absolute truth, either in mythology or in politics.

### 5. Fiction readers make good leaders in a crisis

In my current role, I have been involved in the strategic response to the Covid-19 pandemic in London. Val McDermid argued that fiction readers have made the best leaders during the Covid crisis. She writes that

‘What fiction gives you is the gift of imagination and the gift of empathy. You see a life outside your own bubble.’<sup>1</sup> Imagination matters when you are dealing with a crisis and need a Plan B (and often a Plan C and D as well).

## **6. If you’ve written a thesis, you have wrestled demons and can do anything**

Only those who have written a thesis, or tried to, know how tough a journey it is. If you get through the Slough of Despond this involves, you can probably survive anything, from the worst election campaign to dealing with a pandemic. I am not sure how my computer survived the process without getting thrown out of my flat window. It did though, and I did too.

## **7. Short sentences are good**

In Norwegian, short sentences are good. Most people who have worked for me now know this too. Enough said.

## **8. Good teachers are mentors who allow you to discover the answers on your own**

In a parallel universe, I didn’t get the job that set me on a political path. In that life, I got postdoctoral funding and later a much sought after lecturer’s position. I like to think I might have become a university professor with many publications under my belt. I hope this version of myself would inspire their students as much as Bjarne inspired me. Gently pushing me towards finding my own conclusions. Patient as I missed another deadline and struggled to express coherent thoughts. I am grateful

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1. Brown 2020.

for what I learned from Bjarne – that good teachers are mentors who allow you to find your own answers and your own path. I hope I use the example he set me in my own work by supporting those I work with to do this as well. If I have taken nothing else from my studies, this will suffice.

## Bibliography

Brown, Mark. 2020. 'Fiction readers have made best leaders in Covid-19 crisis, says Val McDermid'. *The Guardian*. 17 August.