

Leaders and Leadership

Jeremy Thorpe was elected as leader of the Liberal Party in January 1967. When he took over from Jo Grimond, the party's support seemed stuck at no more than 10%, as the country swung away from Labour towards Ted Heath's Conservatives; in the 1970 election, the Liberals polled just 7.5% and lost half their seats. Yet in the following four years, Thorpe took the party into its second great post-war revival, winning five by-elections and seeing the Liberal vote rise, in February 1974, to more than six million, over 19% of the total vote.

In the light of growing allegations about his personal life, Jeremy Thorpe stood down as leader in May 1976, and lost his seat in the 1979 general election. Soon after the election he was tried at the High Court for conspiracy to murder, but was found innocent of all charges. He now lives in retirement in London and North Devon.

Duncan Brack and Mark Pack interviewed him for the Journal of Liberal Democrat History on the lessons that can be drawn from his period as party leader.

We started by asking him what advice he had, as a former leader to a current one, for Charles Kennedy. Party organisation is an important area. The leader, Thorpe suggested, had the right to enquire – tactfully – of various departments and committees what they are up to and what they are not; as, at the end of the day, ‘he bears the rap’.

Some things never change – when he was elected as Party Treasurer in 1965, he discovered that the party had enough money only for six months, so fund-raising became an urgent priority. Several years beforehand he had created and raised finance for targeted ‘winnable seats’. However, the shortness of time and money meant that as leader there was no immediate prospect of raising funds. As it was, money started to come in to help the headquarters overdraft, but there was inadequate time to deal adequately with the winnable seats.

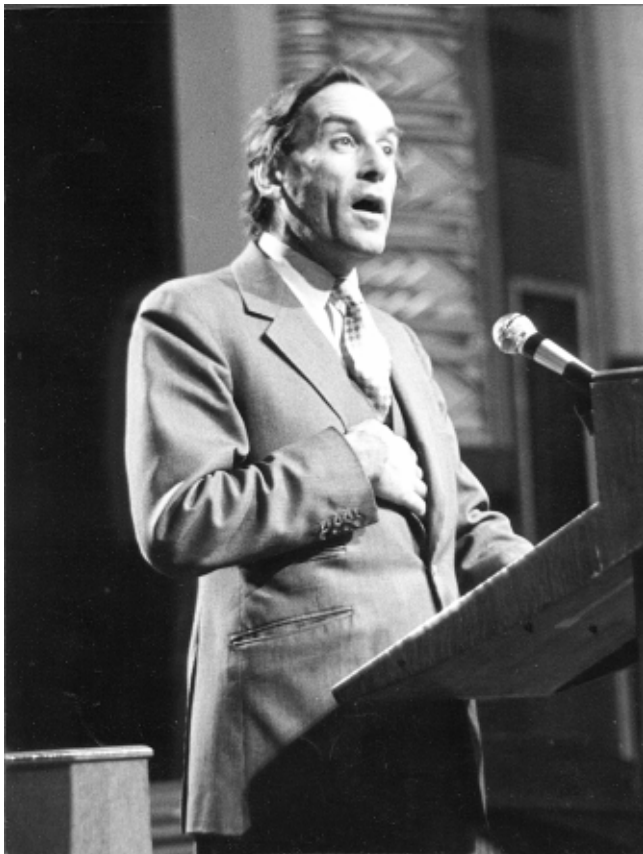
The result was the disaster of the 1970 general election, where the Liberals only narrowly avoided losing three of the six seats they in the end won – had 800 Liberal voters voted Tory in the wrong seats, John Pardoe, David Steel and Thorpe himself would have been defeated, leaving a parliamentary party of

only three MPs, two Scottish and one Welsh. Fortunately, Charles Kennedy appears unlikely to have to face this kind of challenge – but if he does, he needs the ‘courage and determination that Paddy displayed in 1989’ in the face of the devastating Euro election results, where, Thorpe believed, if the Greens had been able to capitalise on the result, ‘they could have broken us’.

But there could be too much concentration on internal matters. ‘If he finds in the organisation a standing committee charged with constitutional issues – abolish it’. There have been clear differences in leadership styles here. Jo Grimond, for example, had ‘no idea what was going on in organisation. On policy, yes – he liked writing articles, and the more difficult they were to understand, the more brilliant people thought they were.’ Thorpe himself was not particularly involved in day-to-day party matters, but he certainly knew what was going on. The disaster of 1970 was due in large part to a failure of party organisation, and as a result, he believed he concentrated more than any other leader on this area. But policy was still important – he was criticised, for example, for spending too much time on Rhodesia, though this was a subject he knew and cared about.

It was a struggle to maintain a public profile for the party. The television companies told him one year that they would only come to the Liberal Assembly to cover his speech, on the last day. ‘Oh’, said Thorpe, taking a decision instantly, ‘I’m making my speech on the first day ... and a second speech on the last day.’ So he did, and the cameras stayed there for the whole time – but this was a further proof of the weakness of the party’s position in the run-up to the 1970 fiasco.

One innovation in February 1974 was spending £10,000 on national advertising – a step which had never been taken before, by any party, at least during general election campaigns. There was some doubt over the legal position, but the Liberals justified it by dividing the total costs between all the constituency campaign expenses. In retrospect, did Thorpe regret opening this Pandora’s Box, where



the other parties could heavily out-spend the Lib Dems? Not at all – it would have happened at some point in any case, and pound for pound he believed the party benefited much more from its national advertising.

One Liberal party political broadcast involved Lester Pearson, the Canadian Liberal leader. Pearson was initially reluctant to take part in an overtly political activity, but Thorpe promised not to ask him anything about politics in Britain, but only about the benefits of Liberal government in Canada. “Mr Pearson, you are the Liberal Prime Minister of Canada. How is it the Liberal Party has consistently defeated the Labour and Tory parties in debate and organisation? What is so great about your party?” It was marvellous broadcast.

Did Jeremy Thorpe think it was true that leaders inevitably grew more distant from the grassroots of their parties? ‘I don’t think so. I was never very close to the committee-, constitutional-amendment sort of people. But I used to get right in there, getting round and seeing people.’ His impression was that he was good at staying in touch with the different parts of the country – Scotland, with Johnnie

Bannerman and George Mackie, mid-Wales, with Roderic Bowen and Emlyn Hooson, the Home Counties, and so on. ‘I went to all the by-elections. I was at the counts in Orpington, Roxburgh & Selkirk and Montgomeryshire.’ It was important that the ‘leader must always be accessible to party members. Bearing in mind that the person with the cause at heart is probably a volunteer worker, and has nothing to gain except the satisfaction of seeing the party

do well.’ In particular, Thorpe ensured that he established regular monthly or weekly meetings with the Young Liberals – then in their ‘Red Guard’ phase – to ensure proper liaison with the national party.

Looking towards the election

What policy challenges will Charles Kennedy face? Europe is undoubtedly the greatest, as it was in Thorpe’s years as leader (in 1972 his small group of MPs saved the legislation taking Britain into the Community from defeat). Many Tories had always displayed ‘a gut reaction against foreigners. If Harold Macmillan had had a free vote in the House of Commons when he decided to apply for Community membership [in 1961], he would have had a massive vote against.’ He believed that the issue of Europe would eventually

drive the Conservatives apart, as had the repeal of the Corn Laws a century and a half ago.

Whether this would result in a major split, into two distinct groupings, or simply a steady stream of defectors to other, more pro-European, parties was ‘too early to say’ – but could well happen after the next election. Part of this depended on William Hague, who, Thorpe believed, ‘would be for the chop’ after losing the next election – as was Home, Heath, and, in a similar manner, Thatcher, when Conservative MPs became convinced that her continued leadership would cost them victory. It was likely, however, that he would be replaced not by someone even more right-wing, but by ‘a healer’ who would try to bring both sides together’.

On Liberal Democrat positioning, argued Thorpe, ‘to remain radicals’, the party must oppose the government when they fall short on social issues such as education and health care. ‘There are certain things they are trying to achieve which we should back, and have done, like devolution ... on those sort of issues of course we should back them. On certain social issues, they’ve done something. But I think we have to keep them up to their own standards which they had when they were in opposition.’ In particular, Thorpe was not

David Steel with Jeremy Thorpe and portrait at the National Liberal Club



impressed by Jack Straw, who seemed to be trying to go one better than his Tory predecessor Michael Howard.

Is there a likelihood of electoral reform for Westminster? 'It depends upon how much the Labour Party needs the tactical Liberal vote at the next election'. They have not entirely ruled out anything. In fact, the *Tories* should really now be keen proponents of reform, given the way in which their representation had been eliminated in many of the big cities. 'My heart bleeds for them', said Thorpe.

Thorpe himself has argued – to the Jenkins commission – for a dual system, using the single transferable vote, with multi-membered constituencies, for the bigger towns and cities, and the alternative vote, with single-member constituencies, for rural areas; in fact, this was the system recommended by the Speaker's Conference on electoral reform in 1917. Thorpe himself had served on a Royal Commission, established by Gwilym Lloyd George in 1955, to consider electoral systems for the new constitutions for the colonies, arguing for PR on the grounds that ethnic minorities had to be represented. Of all the problems in Northern Ireland, the electoral system (PR for local government and the Northern Irish Parliament) had not attracted any criticism; it was seen as part of the healing process.

How different was politics in the 1990s compared with his period as an MP? 'There's a lot more money around.' MPs, and the leader, had far fewer staff – now, with greater research assistance, they are certainly better informed. State funding for political parties would undoubtedly be desirable, and would help to avoid the undue influence exerted by rich individuals, such as Michael Ashcroft – a situation which Thorpe saw as 'outrageous'.

What was likely to happen at the next election? Thorpe believed the situation would be similar to that in 1964, when he had expected that the Liberals would win either ten seats or ninety; nothing in between (in the end the party won nine). 'In the same way, the Liberal Democrats will be down to twenty, or up to sixty.' But the party had



Thorpe on the hovercraft campaign tour in August 1974

to avoid the 1923–24 situation, where the Liberals won 159 seats in 1923, but then crashed to forty in 1924, as they were seen to be propping up a minority Labour government with no clear programme of their own. This need not happen. Party organisation was vital; and the government had to be opposed where necessary.

Amnesty International

Rarely mentioned these days is Jeremy Thorpe's involvement with the human rights organisation Amnesty International. The photographs of African leaders on the wall of his study were a continuing reminder of his interest in the affairs of that continent. Both as a politician and as a journalist, he frequently visited Africa, and took a close interest in the human rights situation.

Support for Amnesty was therefore a natural step. He provided the organisation with information on the state of political prisoners in Ghana, and also became a trustee of the 'prisoners of conscience' fund, which provided aid to recently released political prisoners.

Shortly after his acquittal, in 1979, he was offered the post of Director-General of the British section of Amnesty International. The application caused great controversy amongst the active members of Amnesty in Britain, per-

haps not surprisingly given the timing of the offer. In addition, Amnesty was then having to work hard to show its political independence, and the appointment of someone who had until very recently been a leader of a political party may not have helped. However, given his record of involvement, Thorpe recalls that he felt that the appointment should not have been controversial.

Nonetheless, the divisions within the British Section resulted in a crowded emergency general meeting in central London, at which the ruling Council was voted out (though many of its members were shortly afterwards re-elected). As a result, the appointment fell through. For Thorpe himself, it was, in his words, a 'sad business', though not one that has left any bitterness. For many of those who attended the emergency meeting, it is even now the most exciting Amnesty general meeting they can recall.

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Jeremy Thorpe's reminiscences, *In My Own Time*, were published by Politico's Publishing in 1999.