

INTERVIEW

The last major interview Roy Jenkins gave, in November 2002, was to Adrian Slade, on behalf of *Liberal Democrat News* and the *Journal of Liberal History*.



Roy Jenkins, since 1987 Lord Jenkins of Hillhead, first entered parliament in 1948. It seems hard to believe of a man who still gets up at around 6.30a.m., goes for a walk, reads the newspapers for an hour and a half over breakfast and spends the rest of the morning writing a few thousand more words of his next book. No doubt his afternoons are spent equally busily researching the detail of which his books are always full. He has also been Chancellor of Oxford University since 1987.

My primary interest in recent times has been my writing,' he says. 'I don't know whether reading the papers is useful but I still like to keep in touch with the political process.' Following his much praised biography of Churchill, his new book, *Twelve Cities*, which he modestly dismisses as 'rather self-indulgent', has just been published, and he is working on a biography of Franklin D. Roosevelt. 'It will be relatively short, about 70,000 words,' he says. 'It's mainly for the American market.' That may be, but it is an even bet that, short or long, Liberal Democrats will want to read it too.

We talked in his room in the House of Lords, where he has spoken in debate only a few times since giving up the leadership of the Liberal Democrats peers nearly five years ago. 'I said something on Iraq recently but I don't believe that ex-leaders should get in the way of their successors too much.'

For many older people with an interest in politics Roy Jenkins

remains the best prime minister that the country never had. He certainly shares with Churchill that rare gift of continuing to lead political thinking while writing lengthy, elegant and highly readable books. Anyone who has not read his *Asquith* and *Gladstone* is missing out on fascinating political history.

Roy Jenkins started in senior office as Minister of Aviation in Harold Wilson's government of 1964. He was soon given the Home Office, where, during his two and a half years, he introduced a series of reforming measures, particularly in the fields of sex discrimination, race relations and penal reform, of which he remains rightly proud. He also made sure that David Steel's private member's bill to change the abortion laws was given full time and backing.

In the late 1960s he became the Chancellor who got an unstable, post-devaluation economy back under control. 'Sometimes being Chancellor is like trying to build sandcastles on the beach just below the high tide line,' he

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says, 'But in the end I had some success.' That success just failed to win the 1970 election for Harold Wilson, but Jenkins returned as Home Secretary in 1974, when the principal challenge was intense IRA activity.

Were there any lessons to be drawn from this experience in dealing with Islamic terrorism today?

'I think it is an intractable problem,' he says 'And I am very sceptical that it will be helped by any invasion of Iraq. However that is done, and I do have a pretty fundamental objection to it: I am not convinced that it will reduce rather than increase Islamic terrorism against the West.'

When Roy Jenkins did not succeed Wilson in 1976, as some might have expected, he was appointed President of the European Commission, where he worked until the formation of the SDP in 1981.

Did he regret not having become prime minister?

He qualifies his reply with a broad smile. 'Well, I would have liked very much to *have been* prime minister,' he admits 'But I am not sure how much I would have liked the job at the time. I thought I'd say that to the retiring president of Brazil when I meet him in Oxford tomorrow. He may share my view. I also said it to John Major when he asked me, and in return I asked him whether he regretted having *been* prime minister. He appeared to enjoy my question.'

Earlier in our meeting I had explored with him his most recent, perhaps his last, major contribution to British politics – his chairmanship of the

independent commission on electoral reform. 'I put a lot of effort into that,' he says. 'It took nearly a year, part of which I was working full time.' So far his proposals have been ignored, or at least not implemented.

Did he see any hope for them in the future?

'I am not sure that I see much short-term hope, but I do see medium-term hope. I'll tell you why. The climate has changed and is continuing to change. It is very noticeable that nobody would dream of setting up a new elected authority of any sort these days with first-past-the-post. And therefore I think the House of Commons, as a bastion of first-past-the-postism, is becoming increasingly isolated. It is rather remarkable that these days nobody, even those most sceptical in the government, would dream of proposing it for other bodies. Look at the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly, the European elections, the elected element of the House of Lords, the London Assembly. It is difficult to imagine the Commons holding out indefinitely when all its outlying bastions have fallen down.'

But wasn't the attitude also a great deal to do with majorities in parliament?

'As we pointed out, slightly cynically but correctly, in our report – "When political parties have the will for electoral reform they don't have the authority and when they have the authority they don't have the will" – and not even Asquith's Liberal Party was immune from that. But it is a knuckle point,' he says. 'For example, electoral reform became very

popular in the Tory Party in the seventies when they perceived it as a protection against some kind of Stalinist Socialist threat. They have fallen away now, although why they haven't come round to it again, I don't know. If I were a Conservative today, which I find difficult to imagine, I would be strongly in favour of it, if only on the most narrow grounds of self-interest.'

Roy Jenkins himself in fact served in two minority governments – 1964–66 and the first parliament of 1974.

What had been his attitude to possible party co-operation in those days?

'I have always worn party affiliations fairly lightly,' he says, adding hastily. 'Don't set the alarm bells ringing with that. I am not going to leave the Liberal Democrats. But certainly in '64 I remember being very keen on keeping all lines of communications to Jo Grimond well open, particularly when I needed Liberal support. And in '74, even more strikingly, I won my own qualifications when I put a paper to the cabinet in early spring proposing a Speaker's Conference on electoral reform. Of course, I was shot down very heavily. Harold Wilson wasn't totally opposed but Barbara Castle wrote later in her diaries that "Roy came to us with some preposterous scheme from his instinctive Liberal coalition-mindedness. We sent him away with a flea in his ear."'

He knew Jo Grimond well in the 1960s and they used to talk socially together about co-operation and realignment.

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Did he think Grimond was a good leader?

'Yes. He opened up the field of Lib/Lab co-operation and made the Liberals a much more serious party, although he did not get very far with Harold Wilson with his suggestions of an arrangement in '65. Actually he himself cooled on co-operation later. For example, he was very cool about my '79 Dimpleby lecture.' In many respects this lecture on the BBC had reflected Grimond's earlier views about realignment. 'But he did come round. He actually came to Warrington during the by-election in '81 and found himself quite impressed. And later of course we had that remarkable meeting at the Liberal Assembly in Llandudno.'

Although he was not part of it himself, how did Roy Jenkins view the earlier example of co-operation – the Lib/Lab Pact?

'I think it was a worthwhile exercise but I don't think there was enough of a union of hearts, as Gladstone once said about Ireland, so I don't think it was terribly productive for the future. I actually think it made it more difficult for David Steel to do what he wanted to do subsequently.'

Hadn't the Labour Government benefited more than the Liberals?

'Well, the Liberals didn't want an election in 1977.'

John Pardoe said he did.'

'Ah but John Pardoe always loathed Social Democrats. He and Healey couldn't get on at all and he never liked me much either. He was a curious figure but I was interested to read about him again the other day.'

How much, if at all, had David Steel's views influenced the creation of the SDP?

'He was enthusiastic about the Dimpleby lecture and he came to see me in Brussels two or three times subsequently. We were looking to a future of collaboration.'

Remembering long-standing party speculation about the conversations between them, I asked whether there been any talk of

David Steel and I always got on very well, but then some people said: 'they would, wouldn't they, because David Steel was one of nature's Social Democrats and Roy Jenkins was one of nature's Liberals'

him joining the Liberal Party rather than forming a separate party. 'Some people wanted that, and I did discuss it,' he says. 'But, as I recall, it was David Steel's view, which I shared, that this would have made much less of a breakthrough into the new politics.' So in 1981 four rather different politicians joined together to found the SDP.

'Bill Rodgers was always a close friend and ally of mine,' says Roy Jenkins. 'Shirley slightly less close but also mostly an ally. The odd one out was David Owen, partly because he had about as little liberalism in him as Jack Straw and David Blunkett. Owen was arguably a Social Democrat too but never a Liberal in any sense. He despised not just Liberals but liberals with a small l. David Steel and I always got on very well, but then some people said "they would, wouldn't they, because David Steel was one of nature's Social Democrats and Roy Jenkins was one of nature's Liberals."'

Was that important to him, given what, I suggested, were the two strands within the SDP, one supporting David Owen and the other the other three?

'It was a little more complicated than that' he said, adding, surprisingly, 'Shirley voted for Owen in the leadership contest of 1982, although I think she regretted it afterwards. In fact Shirley and I were the two most instinctive liberals of the four. Bill Rodgers, for whom I had the greatest respect, always slightly believed in a more instinctively Morrisonian approach to discipline, which Shirley and I never did.'

Roy Jenkins insists firmly that he had always envisaged an alliance with the Liberals, and that Shirley Williams soon agreed with that. 'Owen was never wholly convinced and that was the real fault line,' he says. 'The Llandudno Assembly and its incredible atmosphere sealed it all for us, but David Owen was in America. It wasn't quite specifically that he had refused to come but he cer-

tainly did not think himself accursed that he wasn't there. It was said to be a joke made by Owen, although it was not really his style, that "Roy claims to love Liberals but he has never really spoken to one who isn't called Grimond or Bonham-Carter." Quite untrue, of course, and I suspect not really David Owen's joke. Perhaps John Pardoe invented it?'

Amid the 1981–82 Alliance negotiations on seats 'when Bill Rodgers played the hard man, although it all seems rather trivial now', Roy Jenkins courageously went on the by-election stomp once more, this time winning Glasgow Hillhead, but following the highs of the first two years the 1983 election result inevitably came as a disappointment.

Would he have done anything differently and was the supposed attempt to unseat him as Alliance leader during the election a factor?

'I had felt the beginnings of the ebb tide in the by-election and the Falklands War accelerated that. Also the natural tendency to perpetuate a two-party system had begun to reassert itself. As to the rather disagreeable meeting David and I had at Etrick Bridge, I don't think it affected the result much. I have never borne deep resentment against David about that, although I told him afterwards that he did not handle things very well, and he agreed. David has many high accounts in my balance and one small debit has never left a scar.'

David Owen is said to have believed that Roy Jenkins had always envisaged merger with the Liberal Party as inevitable. 'I certainly never envisaged us fighting each other. Where I thought the Alliance might lead I am not quite sure. I think I could sum up my view with that Churchillian speech on American relations "Let it roll like the Mississippi and things will take their course." And, as you know, I subsequently became very keen on merger.'

He feels that over fifteen years the merger has proved very successful as a marriage of minds.

There had been very little back-biting, bitterness and jealousy. The original high aim, to change the face of British politics, had not been achieved but the Liberal Democrats had made politics more tolerable and the fact of the party's presence had undoubtedly changed the Labour Party. 'I don't think that necessarily damages our own long-term prospects' he says, 'but without the presence of the Liberal/SDP Alliance and our merged party there is no doubt that Labour have spiralled downwards, and Blair would not have been able to impose the reformism on the Labour party that he has.'

Roy Jenkins was one of Paddy Ashdown's most enthusiastic supporters in his bid for closer links with Blair's Labour Party.

Did he think more should have happened subsequently?

'Yes, I would have liked to

have seen more but I think we were let down by the performance of the Conservative Party. If there had been a smaller majority, things might well have been different,' he believes. 'I said to Blair, and I think he rather likes sweeping perspectives of that kind, "Lib-Lab rivalry turned the 20th century into a Tory century in the way the 19th had not been. I don't want to see that happen in the 21st century."'

Given his obvious disappointment on that score, not necessarily a disappointment shared by all Liberal Democrats, what did he think of the concept of 'effective opposition'?

'I think that is the best role for now that we can possibly pursue. I believe full amalgamation is dead, at least for some time to come, but I don't think Paddy was wrong to pursue it. It's often worth pursuing holy grails that you don't necessarily achieve.'

In retrospect he believes that his first period as Home Secretary gave him his greatest satisfaction as a minister and, although he was reluctant to answer my question, he says he would like to be remembered by future generations as someone who, during a long political life, remained consistent in his broadly left-of-centre views without having swung violently about. 'But also' he concludes 'For managing, and it is an increasingly rare thing in British politics, to combine being a fairly major politician with many outside interests, without being dominated by them.'

With which assessment most people would readily concur.

A shorter version of this interview was first published in Liberal Democrat News in January 2003

RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

If you can help any of the individuals listed below with sources, contacts, or any other information — or if you know anyone who can — please pass on details to them. Details of other research projects in progress should be sent to the Editor (see page 2) for inclusion here.

Cornish Methodism and Cornish political identity, 1918–1960s.

Researching the relationship through oral history. *Kayleigh Mildon, Institute of Cornish Studies, Hayne Corfe Centre, Sunningdale, Truro TR1 3ND; KMSMildon@aol.com.*

The Hon H. G. Beaumont (MP for Eastbourne 1906–10). Any information welcome – especially from anyone having access to material about the history of Liberalism in Eastbourne – particularly on his political views (he stood as a Radical). *Tim Beaumont, 40 Elms Road, London SW4 9EX.*

The letters of Richard Cobden (1804–65). Knowledge of the whereabouts of any letters written by Cobden in private hands, autograph collections, and obscure locations in the UK and abroad for a complete edition of his letters. *Dr A. Howe, Department of International History, London School of Economics, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE; a.howe@lse.ac.uk.* (For further details of the Cobden Letters Project, see www.lse.ac.uk/collections/cobdenLetters/).

Liberal foreign policy in the 1930s. Focussing particularly on Liberal anti-appeasers. *Michael Kelly, 12 Collinbridge Road, Whitewell, Newtownabbey, Co. Antrim BT36 7SN; mmjkelly@msn.com.*

Liberal policy towards Austria-Hungary, 1905–16. *Andrew Gardner, 17 Upper Ramsey Walk, Canonbury, London N1 2RP; agardner@ssees.ac.uk.*

Liberalism and the local government of London 1919–39. *Chris Fox, 173 Worplesdon Road, Guildford GU2 6XD; christopher.fox7@virgin.net.*

The Liberal Party and the wartime coalition 1940–45. Sources, particularly on Sinclair as Air Minister, and on Harcourt Johnstone, Dingle Foot, Lord Sherwood and Sir Geoffrey Maunder (Sinclair's PPS) particularly welcome. *Ian Hunter, 9 Defoe Avenue, Kew, Richmond TW9 4DL; ian.hunter@curtishunter.co.uk.*

The political life and times of Josiah Wedgwood MP. Study of the political life of this radical MP, hoping to shed light on the question of why the Labour Party replaced the Liberals as the primary popular representatives of radicalism in the 1920s. *Paul Mulvey, 112 Richmond Avenue, London N1 0LS; paulmulvey@yahoo.com.*

Recruitment of Liberals into the Conservative Party, 1906–1935.

Aims to suggest reasons for defections of individuals and develop an understanding of changes in electoral alignment. Sources include personal papers and newspapers; suggestions about how to get hold of the papers of more obscure Liberal defectors welcome. *Clr Nick Cott, 1a Henry Street, Gosforth, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE3 1DQ; N.M.Cott@ncl.ac.uk.*

The Welsh Liberal Tradition – A History of the Liberal Party in Wales 1868–2003. Research spans thirteen decades of Liberal history in Wales but concentrates on the post-1966 formation of the Welsh Federal Party. Any memories and information concerning the post-1966 era or even before welcomed. The research is to be published in book form by Welsh Academic Press. *Dr Russell Deacon, Centre for Humanities, University of Wales Institute Cardiff, Cyncoed Campus, Cardiff CF23 6XD; rdeacon@uwic.ac.uk.*