



**Adrian Slade** talks to Lord Bill Rodgers of Quarry Bank, Labour Cabinet Minister under Callaghan, member of the 'Gang of Four' founders of the SDP, and Leader of the Liberal Democrat in the House of Lords.

# 'HARD MAN' WITH HEART

Oxford friend of Shirley Williams and Dick Taverne; political contemporary of the then Liberals Robin Day and Jeremy Thorpe; Secretary of the Fabian Society in the '50s; victor of the Stockton-on-Tees by-election in '62; junior, senior or cabinet minister in the Labour governments of the '60s and '70s; member of the 'Gang of Four' that founded the SDP and, at least as far as Liberals were concerned, the 'hard man' of the Alliance seat negotiations; Director-General of the RIBA and then the ASA; leader of the Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords – Bill Rodgers is widely remembered for a lifetime of politics that effectively began when he was just eight years old.

'I was born in Liverpool' he says. 'My father was clerk to the Health Committee, which dealt

with housing in those days. I used to travel around the city with him on the trams. When you are eight or nine you are easily impressed and I became very aware of the absolute poverty in the old tenement slums, compared to the comfort of the semi-detached in which we lived. I well remember seeing children outside the pubs without shoes. My father had a great sense of public service and, although he never revealed his political views to me until after he retired, he deliberately used to take me round to the housing and the hospitals. So my interest came from what I saw and my father's commitment to improving those conditions.'

In the 1945 election Bill Rodgers actually supported the Liberal candidate in Toxteth East because he thought he was the best man for the job. That may have been so but sadly Professor Lion Blease,

as he was apparently named, only mustered 6,000 votes.

'It was a great lesson about the importance or not of candidates', he says. 'After the election I wrote to all the parties and then decided to join the Labour Party.'

Educated at Quarry Bank school, from which he takes the title of his peerage, he went to Oxford in the late '40s and began to be politically active, although he did not see himself as inevitably going into politics. 'I actually wanted to become a journalist,' he says, 'and when I'd finished at Oxford I badly needed a job. I applied for two, one with the *Liverpool Daily Post* as a trainee, the other with the Fabian Society. I really wanted the Liverpool job but they took so long to make up their minds I took the Fabian Society offer instead.' And he stayed there for the next nine years, a number of them as the

Society's youngest-ever General Secretary.

He was not very happy with the Labour Party of the '50s. 'It was in a mess. After the 1945–51 government had done its work it ran out of ideas. There was a serious split between the consolidators under Herbert Morrison and the traditional left under Aneurin Bevan. Although in some ways I preferred the left, I thought they were off the point, particularly about nationalisation. I did not think we should immediately be nationalising cement, sugar and so on. It was a nonsense. That view gradually became more and more developed within the party, although it really took from 1959 to Blair before it the change came in full. I think the Labour governments in between managed well and did some good things, particularly Roy Jenkins, but there was not really a coherent view of what we were about.'

Bill Rodgers was a founder member of the Campaign for Democratic Socialism and in the early '60s was a strong supporter of Labour leader Hugh Gaitskell in his attempts to rid the party of its anti-nuclear stance on defence and its 'Clause Four' commitment to nationalisation. 'I didn't agree with Hugh's opposition to Europe but I think he would have come round, and, had he lived, we might have seen a significant change in the party and a more convincing alternative to the Tories. He would have been an outstanding prime minister and more successful than Wilson', he believes.

'Wilson wasted those first eighteen months after '64,' he says. 'He was waiting for the moment to get a big majority, so we never dealt with the crisis that was coming. I don't think he was a good prime minister. He did not always tell the truth. His strength was that he was a good picker of people: Roy Jenkins instead of Antony Crosland for Home Secretary and then Chancellor, for example.'

For a moment Bill Rodgers philosophises about his approach to politics. 'The phrase used to

be that "you can't have socialism without taxation". Forget the word "socialism" but my view then, and still is, that you don't get a fair and just society unless you are prepared to pay for it. So I remain one of those who still thinks that, if you want better public services, you have to be prepared to pay for them through taxation.'

Although in the '50s he had been lukewarm about the concept of Europe, he attributes his subsequent enthusiasm to what he sees as the final collapse of British independent influence after Suez, and Europe was part of his platform when he first stood unsuccessfully in a by-election in 1957.

His second by-election, which older Liberals remember better, was at Stockton-on-Tees in Orpington year, 1962. Rodgers eventually won with a majority of 7,000 over the Tories but only after Prime Minister Macmillan had paid his first ever visit to a by-election, to ward off the Liberal challenge. He just kept the Tories in second place. What did Bill Rodgers think of the Liberals of those days?

'A lot of them booed me at my by-election but I liked them', he says, 'even if I did not take them very seriously. But, when I came into the House, I developed a great respect for Jo Grimond and listened to his speeches very seriously. They were thoughtful, reflective and right, although they did not always seem to get to grips with the rough, tough brutality of questions. At least that was what I thought. I also had a lot of time for Eric Lubbock.'

Bill Rodgers makes it pretty clear that he was never a Harold Wilson man, and he obviously responded well to Wilson's rival George Brown, for whom he later worked as a junior minister.

His ministerial career covered all the major departments except education, and included being Secretary of State for Transport in the mid-70s. He claims that his first job, under George Brown at the Department for Economic Affairs, gave him the most satisfaction and, interestingly, that

working with Roy Jenkins at the Treasury was the least rewarding. 'For all George's short-comings it was very exciting all the time. I got on with him and learned a huge amount, and when I moved with him to the Foreign Office, I learned a lot more', he says.

'Roy Jenkins had given me my Fabian Society job and we always got on very well', he says. 'He was like an elder brother. I don't know whether we were of like mind. He was much more liberal and tolerant than I was, and fastidious. That's probably a strength. I am not sure what he meant when he referred in your last interview<sup>1</sup> to my Morrisonian tendencies, but I suppose that almost from the beginning he had been moving to a more liberal form of social democracy, whereas I was much more mainstream, rigid and probably more boring. But working for Roy at the Treasury was less exciting. His style was very different from what I was accustomed to and perhaps being a close friend did not make it easier.

In the 1974–79 parliament, Rodgers was a junior minister at Defence for two and a half years, joining the cabinet as Secretary of State for Transport in 1976. 'With the exception of Ernie Marples and Barbara Castle very few people have made much of an impact in that job. The timescales are too long and you need a particular sort of personality to get anywhere.' During this period, there was a very real threat that the government would lose its majority in a vote of confidence. This brought Bill Rodgers once again face to face with the Liberal Party.

'Oh yes, I remember that well. Peter Jenkins of the *Guardian* rang me and said that David Steel wanted to talk to Jim Callaghan, which I thought was interesting. So I spoke to David and then told Jim what he had in mind (a possible pact). Jim said he would be happy to talk. They did and the Pact, which I voted for, was the result. Over the period of the Pact I dealt with David Penhaligon on transport. He was quite different

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from me in style and approach but we did find a good deal of common ground. In fact I think Liberal influence was generally much greater during the Pact than most Liberals supposed.'

Rodgers and Steel did not renew their communications prior to the formation of the SDP. 'David tried but I didn't want to. I think he was hoping that I might join up with Roy in some fourth party. I did not want to discuss it. I wanted to keep my head clear to decide which way to go. I didn't want to compromise the possibility of bringing others with me into any new venture.'

When he and the rest of the 'Gang' formed the SDP, did he see the SDP as filling a gap in alliance with the Liberal Party or as standing on its own? 'I saw it as two parties in parallel until there was natural convergence. That's why I said at our launch that our two parties should divide the seats equally. That went down very badly with Social Democrats like David Owen and Mike Thomas, who wanted to fight all the seats, but equally badly with most of the Liberal Party. That's why I had no choice but to play the hard man in holding the line. I was very tough. In the SDP we knew what we were doing. We had worked it out carefully and we were startled to find that the Liberals hadn't done the same.'

Getting used to the Liberal way doing things obviously caused Bill Rodgers some problems, but his determination to see the negotiations through successfully apparently had the effect of convincing David Owen that he was a man more after his own heart than Roy Jenkins or Shirley Williams. Owen was to be proved dramatically wrong a few years later.

'Do you remember those difficult discussions between the parties about defence in 1985?' Bill Rodgers asks. 'I had had a lot of experience of defence issues and when we had that joint commission to decide the Alliance's approach to the replacement of Polaris by Trident

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(effectively an agreement that the life left in Polaris meant that no firm policy decision need yet be made), Owen became very angry with me. He regarded me as having let him down. He was angry with Shirley too but I had to be punished and he was ruthless about it. It was like a Star Chamber approach in a specially convened party committee, with Bob MacLennan throwing the first stone. After that I don't think David and I spoke to each other again for many years.'

All involved in the Alliance in the early '80s try to pinpoint why it did not quite break through. Apart from the frequently acknowledged political effect of the Falklands victory, Bill Rodgers also blames the Darlington by-election that followed Simon Hughes' win at Bermondsey. 'We should have won that too but we had a candidate who was not up to the spotlight of a by-election and the press took full advantage of it. If we had won, it might have made a huge difference. In general we also underestimated the strength of Labour voters' loyalty to their party.'

After the 1983 election Rodgers saw an eventual merger of the Liberals and the SDP as right and inevitable. 'On the night of the 1987 election I remember saying on late-night television that merger must now come as quickly as possible. In the event we took too long. We had a lot of problems in the SDP with our 60/40 split vote. We were not able to deliver to the Liberal Party as we should have done and that put things back initially for the merged party, but after that I think our joint party has been a remarkable achievement. A lot of credit goes to Paddy Ashdown for our climb back. I think few people around the world would have expected our result in '97, whereas now, wherever you go, we are totally recognised as a significant third party. We've even got PR after all those years of Liberal campaigning.'

Like Roy Jenkins, Bill Rodgers has welcomed the changes in

the Labour Party and attributes them in great measure to the success of the Liberal Democrats. He also admits to an admiration for Tony Blair. 'I am not a wholly one-party man. I am capable of recognising worth in other parties. There is now a new Labour Party that is nothing to do with the old Labour Party. Tony Blair may have many faults but I am prepared to ask whether we could have a better Labour leader than he is now.'

So where are the Liberal Democrats in the political spectrum of today? 'It's a difficult question but to me the essential essence of what the Lib Dems are is a party that gives priority to the public services and the will to pay for them, is concerned about the elimination of poverty and greed – in fact is concerned about the liberal nature of our society and its quality. It's not really about left, right or centre. It's about what you believe in.'

We concluded with the issue of the day – Iraq. Bill Rodgers sees himself as more of a hawk than the party as a whole but, like most other people, is relieved to see a relatively quick and successful end to the hostilities. He does not see the unilateral action by Britain and the US as setting a precedent for future action. 'Each occasion has to be looked at carefully and separately', he says.

Having suffered a stroke a few years ago, after three and a half years as a firm and successful leader of the party in the Lords, he has had to withdraw from very active politics. Nevertheless he still attends the Lords, and the remarkable recovery he has made suggests that he still has plenty more to contribute to life in some capacity. He may have had to play the hard man occasionally but his heart is still firmly in the right place.

*A shorter version of this interview was first published in Liberal Democrat News in May 2003.*

1 See *Journal of Liberal History* 38 (spring 2003), pp. 6–10.